

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

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## Introduction

The four countries of the UK have a broadly common labour market, but are increasingly taking different approaches to their policies for vocational education and training, further and higher education and skills development. And while each nation's culture, social and political life have diverged to some extent since democratic devolution in the late 1990s, it could be argued that the UK still provides a useful 'home international laboratory' for policy learning in the area of FE and skills. This type of cross-national comparison is particularly important in the context of BREXIT with the increased emphasis on developing high value-added enterprises and an appropriately educated and skilled UK workforce. *The FE and Skills Across the Four Countries of the UK* research project, led by Professors Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours at UCL IOE and funded by Edge Foundation, DfE and City and Guilds, takes the form of a seminar series addressing the 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?*

The extent of 'convergence and divergence' across the four countries of the UK informed the first seminar of this project. Attended by the inquiry's core team members (see Appendix), the seminar discussed the initial scoping paper covering developments affecting the UK as whole and separate seminar papers briefly summarising the current position in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). It agreed the scope of the inquiry, some key concepts and definitions, as well as outlining administrative and practical arrangements for larger seminars involving a mix of policy-makers, researchers, employers and researchers in each of the four countries.

The following notes record the main points discussed during the seminar in terms of the conceptual issues and characteristics of the FE and skills systems in the four countries.

## Key issues for the Inquiry

Initial seminar discussion assessed the different forces for convergence and divergence that are changing in the light of common challenge of Brexit, political divergences between some of the countries of the UK and the Westminster Government and the increased emphasis on developing high value-added enterprises and an appropriately educated and skilled UK workforce.

Participants suggested that the aims of the project should be to:



- identify models for policy learning across the UK; achieve some policy learning within the core group; and look at the issues from the perspective of key players in each of the four countries
- engage in some conceptual innovation, perhaps by further developing the conceptual terms set out in the scoping paper
- consider the impact of wider constitutional relationships between the four countries on the processes of convergence and divergence in relation to FE and skills
- reviewing the FE and skills system from the perspective of UK-wide players, such as awarding organisations, teacher professional associations and employers.

### England

Recent policy in England has been characterised as adopting an `extreme Anglo-Saxon model', with reforms that have reasserted traditional values in terms of both curriculum content and pedagogy. These include the introduction of the English Baccalaureate for 14-16 year olds, with an emphasis on academic subjects and English and maths; a shift to linear and summative assessment in GCSEs and A Levels; and greater emphasis on external assessment in Applied General and Technical qualifications. The Post-16 Skills Plan envisages three distinct routes for progression for 16-19 year olds, via either academic options, technical qualifications (the new T-levels) or Apprenticeships. An apprenticeship levy on employers will fund new standards-based apprenticeships which are being actively promoted by government, particularly at the higher levels.

Particular distinguishing features relevant to policy development in England are:

- active government support for new autonomous types of provider to deliver upper secondary education and the gradual erosion of the role of local authorities
- post-16 area-based reviews, focused on securing the financial viability of FE colleges, including by promoting mergers where necessary
- continued changes in national governance resulting in responsibility for this policy area now resting with a single Department (the Department for Education) and the creation of a single funding body (the Education and Skills Funding Agency) covering all sectors other than HE.

#### Further points arising from discussion

- the observation that there is no national qualifications body in England, unlike the three other countries of the UK
- the English Baccalaureate has a very academic focus compared with other models in the UK, as well as abroad
- there is still a major area of uncertainty as to what will happen to the large number of 16-year olds (c 200,000 each year) who are not ready to progress to A Levels, T Levels or an Apprenticeship.

#### Scotland

The concept of a skills strategy to support economic development is central to Scotland's approach, building on the Scottish Government's 2010 *Skills for Scotland* paper. The college sector (Scotland's Colleges) is seen as playing a critical role in this. A succession of initiatives has sought to make it more flexible, learner-centred and efficient, with a stronger focus on supporting jobs and growth. However, the number of students in colleges has declined significantly in recent years, partly as a result of funding cuts, some of which have been made to finance an expansion of HE. Only 14 per cent of college students now progress directly into employment, compared with 69 per cent who go on to further studies.

Particular distinguishing features relevant to policy development in Scotland are:

- Scotland's Colleges are much less strongly associated with FE than in other parts of the UK with relatively high level of HE provision.
- The theme of the 'learner journey' to create conditions and support mechanisms to promote efficient and flexible progression between the ages of 15 and 24.
- A major shift in the balance of HNC/D provision from vocational qualifications in their own right, and mainly part-time, to becoming mainly full-time transitional qualifications towards degrees in a number of subject areas, eg business and computing.
- Regionalisation of colleges, resulting in a reduction in the overall number and the majority of regions now having just one college.

#### Further points arising from discussion

- The policy of maintaining free access to HE in Scotland has been associated with a period of increased funding for the HEI sector, but reduced funding for the College sector.
- Foundation Apprenticeships in Scotland can be undertaken alongside academic qualifications in the upper stages of secondary school. They can lead directly to employment, or to a Modern Apprenticeship, and some universities will allow them count towards applications for degree entry in some subject areas. These apprenticeships include a work placement, but do not have employed status, which perhaps makes them more akin to a Traineeship than a full Apprenticeship.
- There is still a continuing significant gap in attainment levels of young people from different social backgrounds in school based examinations. The Scottish Government is considering a regionalisation process for schools as one means of addressing this issue.
- Colleges have to work towards targets specified in a Regional Outcome Agreement (ROA). This identifies the social and economic needs of the region which they will meet, and funding is provided by the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) on this basis.

#### **Wales**

Following a process of rationalisation and further mergers, the FE sector in Wales now comprises just 13 institutions, in a country with 22 local authorities and where transport links are difficult in many areas. The Government has a strong commitment to expanding apprenticeships over the next five years, from the current level of 68,000, with the emphasis on Level 3 and above. There has been a sharp increase in employer demand for apprentices, prompted by introduction of the training levy.

Current policy on post-compulsory education is focused on taking forward the ambitious recommendations of the 2016 Hazelkorn Report. These seek to rationalise and realign arrangements for oversight of *all* post compulsory education and training, including FE, School Sixth Forms and HE, to allow a more strategic, co-ordinated and coherent approach to provision. They include a proposal to set up a new post-compulsory intermediary body with legislative authority to undertake and implement system-wide planning and co-ordination functions.

Particular distinguishing features relevant to policy development in Wales are:

- Tensions and competition between schools and colleges for post-16 students, with little effective independent careers information advice and guidance.
- Greater disparities in equality measures of education and skills attainment (gender, disability and social class) than in other parts of the UK.
- A high dependency on the European Social Fund to support apprenticeships.
- A generally critical perception of a market- led approach to provision and a stronger emphasis on regulation and planning, with elements of competition-based funding.

Further points arising from discussion

- The border with England is very 'porous': For example, a significant proportion of young people travel outside Wales to pursue post-compulsory education courses, especially in HE; many institutions in Wales make some use of exam boards based in England.
- There are also significant geographical issues within the country, with a trend towards concentration of provision in the main regional centres.
- Wales has started to look into the development of regional skills plans in a few areas, broadly following the Scottish approach.
- There is still a strong cultural valuing of educational opportunity in Wales, which helps explain the retention of comprehensive schools as a prominent part of the educational system.
- The Welsh Bacallaureate has come under a lot of strain, with some research evidence that it is linked to constrained degree and higher degree trajectories, and some popular criticism that it occupies curriculum time that could be used for another 'A' level.
- Welsh language teaching remains a major political issue. New targets were announced recently to increase the number of Welsh medium schools and the attention to Welsh in all schools, with a goal that by 2030, three-quarters of school leavers should be fluent (July 2017) .

## Northern Ireland

The province has tended to adopt a mix of approaches from other parts of the UK (mainly England or Wales). These are usually brought in a couple of years after their implementation elsewhere, in order to pick those that are proving most successful. For example, no decision has yet been taken to introduce an employer levy to fund apprenticeships.

Colleges in Northern Ireland, which have been subject to a regionalisation process, have moved away from attempting to promote lifelong learning and there is little sense of their meeting regional needs. The emphasis is very much on equipping students with skills for the workplace. FE tends to be seen as a 'cinderella' service, catering for the large tail of underachievement at 16 by providing literacy, numeracy and work-readiness skills. A key theme of the current strategy is to encourage colleges to develop links with both employers and schools in their local areas.

Particular distinguishing features relevant to policy development in Northern Ireland are:

- The political vacuum caused by the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly in January 2016, which continues to impede effective policy development.
- A history of segregation, both by religion and gender, and selection by academic attainment in educational provision.
- Responsibility for policy is divided between two separate Government departments (Education and Economy), which to an extent compete for funding and influence.

### Further points arising from discussion:

- Students are less likely to go to college post-16 than in other parts of the UK, because of the pre-eminence of the grammar school system and the role of school sixth forms.
- Delivery of apprenticeships appears very ad hoc at present and it remains unclear whether the levy will be introduced.
- There is some HE provision in colleges, but this accounts for a relatively small proportion of the total.
- University fees in NI have been capped at £3,000 pa, which has affected the numbers applying for places at English universities.

### Policy learning across the countries of the UK

Further points made in discussion of the approach to be adopted in undertaking the project:

- The project should explore the extent to which there is a vision of the purpose of provision in FE and skills, and what that vision is in each of the countries.
- It will be important to distinguish the main characteristics of FE and skills provision, providers and governance arrangements in each country.
- The project should also pay close attention to the role of HE as a prominent factor shaping the agenda for FE and skills policies.
- It would be helpful to gather basic statistical data on participation and progression in all four countries to help inform discussions and comparisons during the project.
- What are the implications of key differences across the four countries? For example, qualifications bodies play a very important regulatory role in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respectively, but there is no longer any equivalent body in England. These three countries also all work with a national credit framework. This is not the case in England.
- Which aspects of reform drive policies in each of the four countries (e.g. qualifications and related performance measures in England) and what difference does this make to policy outcomes?
- There should be consideration of the role of employers in each system, whether they are fulfilling policy-makers' expectations and (to the extent they are not) what 'compensatory' arrangements are needed to enable systems to function effectively.
- How apprenticeships are operating in the four countries and what lessons might be learnt.
- By comparison with most European countries, experienced FE professionals are relatively absent from processes of policy review in the UK. To what extent is this the case in each country and what are the implications for practice?

The seminar concluded that there are clear grounds for seeking to learn lessons from different policy developments and processes across the UK. It was recognised that there are still many background factors that need to be drawn out in order to inform policy learning. The first stage of 'policy learning' should be to ensure that all the relevant information is available.

Attendees

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Dr Tracy Irwin	School of Education, Ulster University
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