

**Policy and policy learning
across the four countries of the UK:
The case of further education and skills**

An initial scoping paper

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Introduction

The paper and questions for the Inquiry

This initial scoping paper provides a contextual and conceptual background to inform the upcoming research inquiry project 'Policy and policy learning across the four countries of the UK: the case of further education and skills'. The Inquiry is organised and directed by UCL Institute of Education (IOE), but is funded and supported by the Edge Foundation, City and Guilds and the Department for Education (DfE). These partners are directly involved in all stages of the Inquiry.

The paper aims to act as a resource for the planned seminars by offering ways of looking at key education and training issues in four countries – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (NI) - that continue to share fundamental system features, yet have been increasingly travelling in different policy directions. It does so by providing some initial contextual information about the four countries in area of FE, skills and policy and, on the basis of this, it provisionally maps processes of convergences and divergences in the area of further education and skills. Using this initial analysis, the paper proceeds to explore issues of policy learning and potential opportunities for the production of new knowledge and shared understanding amongst different stakeholders in the four countries of the UK. In the final section, the paper confirms the overall project research strategy and the following key 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?

Convergences and divergences across the countries of the UK – an opening assessment

The geopolitical focus for this research is the four countries of the UK - England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (NI). We consider that the time is ripe for cross-UK comparisons of further education and skills due to a number of common developments occurring across the four countries in terms of policy on further education (FE) and skills. These include the regionalisation of FE colleges in Scotland, Wales and NI and area-based reviews in England; a new apprenticeship model in England and the UK-wide apprenticeship levy; 19+ loans for FE; curriculum and qualifications changes in all countries and the reforms

to technical education in England contained within the Post-16 Skills plan. However, as we will see, these common developments are taking place in very different national contexts and in which there have been processes of policy divergence underway, particularly since democratic devolution in 1999.

Despite the existence of a rich conceptual framework - 'home international comparisons' (e.g. Raffe *et al.*, 1999; Raffe *et al.*, 2001) - for addressing these issues, knowledge about the policy and practical approaches being taken in FE and skills in each of the four countries and the assumptions and principles that underpin them remains relatively under-researched. We consider the countries of the UK to be a particularly fruitful site, referred to elsewhere as a possible 'natural laboratory' for policy learning (Raffe and Byrne, 2005), due to the processes of convergence and divergence and the possibilities within this geopolitical laboratory for 'policy learning'. This is becoming particularly important in the new context of 'Brexit' with the increased emphasis on developing high value-added enterprises and an appropriately educated and skilled UK workforce.

Despite the progressive weakening of a sense of a UK-wide education and training system, there remain strong processes of convergence between the four countries. They continue to share a common labour market, will all be involved in one way or another in Brexit and, compared to continental education and training systems, still exhibit UK-type features such as curriculum choice in upper secondary education (USE) and an internationalised higher education system. However, they are increasingly diverging in terms of policy as each nation introduces reforms that are designed to respond to global, national and local circumstances. Points of divergence have been particularly noticeable in relation to the upper secondary curriculum, school organisation and policy narratives around skills utilisation, with the three smaller countries diverging to differing degrees from a dominant Westminster and English discourse (Hodgson and Spours, 2016). At the core of this lies the processes of democratic devolution that have provided spaces for differing ideas to emerge about education in a globalised era, linked to specific national circumstances, overlaid now by a much wider divergent national politics that affect England-Scottish relations in particular.

Moreover, the processes of divergence appear to be gathering pace. 'Managed divergence, that took place under the Labour Governments directly after democratic devolution, saw a situation in which commonality and difference was more finely balanced. This now appears to be giving way to 'accelerated divergence' between England on the one hand and Scotland, Wales and NI on the other, due principally to growing political and educational differences in particular areas of education and its governance between the three devolved governments and the previous Westminster Coalition Government and now the Conservatives. In terms of political orientation, England is seen as having followed a much more explicitly 'Anglo-Saxon' reform trajectory (Hodgson and Spours, 2014), whereas the other countries have appeared more oriented towards Nordic models (Hodgson and Spours, 2016). These differences, that have been accumulating for more than a decade, are also being fuelled by Brexit, at least at the political-economic levels. However, the decision to leave the EU is placing greater emphasis on national skills development which could be seen as a new force for convergence.

The processes of divergence are not uniform between the different countries. This is due factors concerning country size, education policy tradition and education performance. There are limits to full autonomy of small education systems that are joined to a large and dominant partner (England). Scotland has been able to follow its own path due to its long history of education independence; the evolution of its own 'education state'; relatively good system performance; and a highly developed university sector. Wales on the other hand, while striking a distinctive policy course since 1999, has felt constrained by its continuing dependence on English higher education institutions and employment opportunities and now the public and political pressure to raise performance due to its recent PISA results. NI faces similar constraints to striking out on its own. The very small size of its education system and the legacy of historic, political divisions have meant that it was not able to take a decisively different path to England following devolution in 2007.

In the context of these highly differentiated national contexts, the key issue will be understanding how the new FE and skills agendas are emerging in each national case; how they are being interpreted in the differing contexts; and the policy learning opportunities that arise in this particular 'policy laboratory'.

The contexts of FE and skills in the four countries of the UK

Does size matter?

Undertaking policy and system comparison between the four countries of the UK faces a fundamental challenge – the difference in size and influence of England (population of 55 millions) compared to the much smaller Scotland (5 millions), Wales (3 millions) and NI (2 millions). Moreover, and in terms of the generation of policy, England tends not to be viewed as a separate country as such, but as ‘Westminster’ because it returns the vast majority of MPs to the House of Commons who tend to decide its political complexion. Nevertheless, despite size differences, these ‘home international’ comparisons are important, not least because they affect the way in which we talk about the UK in educational terms. Is there still such a thing as a UK education and training system or do we have to consider ‘UK-ness’ as a thing of the past, now to be replaced by distinct national policy narratives in areas of upper secondary education (USE), FE and skills?

England

England, being the biggest country in terms of population and size, houses a large number of the UK selective and research-intensive universities and continues to provide the majority of USE qualifications for Wales and NI and for the small number of schools in Scotland that wish to offer them. In terms of the effects of politics, following the General Election of 2010, policy on USE swerved towards what has been termed ‘an extreme Anglo Saxon model’ (Hodgson and Spours, 2014). Examples include changes to the national curriculum in England that have taken it in a more traditional direction both in terms of content and pedagogy; a focus on ‘the English Baccalaureate’ for 14-16 year olds that places greater emphasis on the acquisition of so called ‘facilitating’ academic subjects; and a decisive shift towards linear and summative approaches to assessment in GCSEs and A Levels. Vocational qualifications too have also been subject to reform, having been divided into Applied General and Technical, both of which contain much greater external examination. This approach to end point assessment has also been introduced into the new standards-based apprenticeships that are to be funded via a UK-wide apprenticeship levy. The emphasis has been on universities setting standards in general education and employers in VET, although institutional accountability still very much lies with Ofsted and national performance

indicators and targets. The recent *Post-16 Skills Plan* (DfE, 2016), which proposes the development of 15 new Technical Routes (T Levels) based on the apprenticeship standards, formalises this approach further by separating academic and vocational learning more explicitly.

Examples of the Anglo-Saxon approach can also be seen in the institutional and governance arrangements in England. There has been increased support for autonomous schools and a range of new education providers (e.g. UTCs, Studio Schools) competing with the more traditional providers – school sixth forms and FE colleges - for the delivery of USE. FE colleges continue to operate as incorporated bodies, but the recent post-16 area-based review in England (HM Government, 2015), while focusing primarily on the financial viability of colleges, appeared to suggest the possibility of greater co-ordination at the local and regional levels. Until quite recently, the role for local authorities in the provision and oversight of education and training has been gradually eroded since the late 1980s, with funding increasingly being operated by national government and other policy steers being directly transmitted from central government to institutions. The future devolution of the adult skills budget to certain city regions/groups of local authorities might suggest a possible change in direction here, but this is still a subordinate trend in England.

Scotland

The Scottish system now occupies a unique position within the UK. It is almost wholly independent of English education policy. Scotland has a long history of independence in this area, with its distinctive USE system emerging during the 1980s and into the 1990s. Based on a broad curriculum up to the age of 15, five or more modular subjects (Highers) are taken at the age of 15/16 and selected from a range of both academic and vocational courses. The vast majority of young Scots entering higher education progress to Scottish universities (Croxford and Raffe, 2014). In terms of contemporary policy, the most recent curriculum reform, *Curriculum for Excellence* (CFE), originating in 2002, is seen by Scottish policy-makers as a response to Scottish conditions and the need for greater choice and creativity rather than to the demands of PISA (Hodgson and Spours, 2016). With regards to educational governance, Scotland is also quite different from England. It has its own national regulatory and qualifications development body, the Scottish Qualifications

Authority (SQA), the inspectorate is development focused, there is a strong role for local authorities and the teacher unions are influential in policy terms. It also has its own unified national credit and qualifications framework that it successfully promotes globally (Howieson and Raffe, 2013).

In terms of FE and skills policy, a priority for the Scottish government has been to tackle youth unemployment, particularly since 2008, with a guarantee of a training or learning place for all 16-19 year olds as part of its *Opportunities for All* proposals (Scottish Government, 2012). As part of this, it set up an independent Commission on Developing Young Scotland's Workforce, under the chairmanship of Sir Ian Wood. The Commission's report, *Education Working for All* (Scottish Government, 2014), strongly influenced its seven-year youth employment strategy published in the same year (Scottish Government, 2014b). This strategy, which sets a target of reducing youth unemployment by 40 per cent by 2021, sees *Curriculum for Excellence*, regionalisation of Scottish FE colleges, an expanded Modern Apprenticeship programme and significant employer engagement as the mechanisms for creating a 'world class vocational education system' (ii). Interestingly it also focuses on the concept of 'fair work' and argues that there is a connection between a fair society and a strong economy.

Wales

Since 1999 and democratic devolution, Wales has attempted to create a distinctive approach to USE with its '14-19 Learning Pathways' reform process, which began in 2004, and by establishing a Welsh Baccalaureate Qualifications Framework that encompasses all types of USE qualifications and focuses on building skills for study, life and work. These have used English qualifications (GCSEs, A Levels and vocational awards), but Wales has not always gone along with Westminster Government policy. It did not implement the 14-19 Diplomas (a major initiative of the previous Labour Government) and is refusing to implement the Government's GCSE and A Level reforms, preferring to stay with the past arrangements in terms of modularisation and assessment. Differences have also taken place in relation to school organisational reform with no attempt to develop autonomous schools, retaining instead an important regulatory role for local authorities with an emphasis on institutional collaboration rather than competition. In addition, Wales has

established an independent regulator and awarding body (Qualifications Wales), modelled on Scotland's SQA.

In terms of FE and skills, following on from a range of mergers between Welsh FE colleges, stimulated by the Transformation agenda, Welsh post-compulsory education policy as a whole is currently under reform as a result of the Hazelkorn report, *Towards 2030: A framework for building a world-class post-compulsory education system for Wales* (Hazelkorn, 2016). This report was strongly critical of the lack of coherent post-16 learning pathways and the duplication of resources and roles between different agencies and further and higher education. It argued for a more coherent and strategic approach to 'learning for life' and the setting up of a new post-compulsory intermediary body for system planning and co-ordination. This latter recommendation was taken forward by the Welsh Government in January 2017.

Northern Ireland (NI)

There are a distinct set of issues regarding the context of NI – a history of deep-rooted political conflict from which the country is slowly emerging; a very small education system; the existence of extensive poverty; a well-known selective and religiously divided secondary education system; and academic domination of the USE curriculum.

Despite a close historical affinity to the English system, particularly by the Unionist community, in recent years NI has embarked on curriculum reform with similarities to Scotland. The revised National Curriculum seeks to promote broad skills and areas of study that can assist young people in the labour market. As part of their curriculum, alongside the more traditional subjects, schools also need to build in broader competences such as 'learning for life and work' (i.e. employability, personal development and local and global citizenship). USE in NI is now shaped not only by English-style qualifications, but also by an Entitlement Framework (DENI, 2014) that promotes curriculum choice with access to broad vocational qualifications from the age of 14 and institutional collaboration through Area Learning Communities.

In terms of FE and skills, NI, like Scotland has gone through a process of regionalisation of its FE colleges. Currently there are six regional colleges that are seen as playing a key role in the *Success Through Skills – Transforming Futures* (Department for the Economy, 2011) agenda, both in creating a strong economy and supporting social inclusion. They are overseen by the Department for the Economy and Learning which published a new strategy for FE in 2016, *Further Education Means Success*. This document makes clear that colleges need to play a key role in their regions in partnership with other providers and key stakeholders and will have a prominent part to play in the national Strategic Advisory Forum and Sectoral Partnerships that have been set up to identify skill demands and ensure professional and technical qualifications meet the needs of employers.

Policy learning across the countries of the UK – barriers and opportunities

The concepts of policy borrowing and policy learning

A key question is whether, how far and in what ways the UK represents a ‘laboratory’ for this study in which policy learning can take place. By policy learning we are referring to the capacity of policy-makers and other policy actors to use historical and international evidence to better understand their own national systems; to identify and discuss trends that might affect all systems and to develop modes of governance that improve the relationship between policy and practice (Raffe and Spours, 2007; Raffe, 2011, Hodgson and Spours, 2016). Policy learning defined in this way can be contrasted with ‘policy borrowing’ that is often highly political and exclusive in motivation as politicians and policy makers seek international justification for already existing policy; engage in implementing highly selective samples of ‘best practice’, with an assumption about the possibility of successfully transferring policy and practice from one national context to another (Raffe, 2011).

But even policy borrowing can be regarded as a form of policy learning, albeit in a narrower sense. The question, therefore, is the scope, the breadth and the depth of the learning taking place. This more ‘expansive’ approach to policy learning (Hodgson and Spours, 2016) can be positively influenced by the following factors:

- the identification of common problems and challenges to be collaboratively investigated rather than a focus on transnational indicators such as PISA;
- a deep understanding of the influence of national contexts rather than the assumption of cross-national uniformity;
- a focus on how problems are interpreted to inform 'good practice' rather than the search for 'excellent practice' to be transferred;
- a wide range of policy actors involved rather than the preserve of policy elites;
- a willingness to share knowledge rather than using international comparison for national performance advantage;
- governance structures and policy processes that are slower and more deliberative rather than a focus on policy speed and policy novelty.

Recent research, however, suggests that the conditions for a more expansive approach to policy learning have not existed of late across the four countries of the UK (Hodgson and Spours, 2016). This is, as we have seen, due principally to policy divergences with regard to the USE curriculum and school organisation. Nevertheless, we have speculated that the area of FE and vocational skills may provide a more fruitful terrain for joint investigation; information exchange and greater mutual understanding. Even here, however, there are reasons for caution. Ewart Keep (2017) notes that in the area of skills development there are sharply divergent policy approaches between England and Scotland. The latter has been less inclined to focus purely on the supply of skills, rather it has been seeking to pay more attention to skills utilisation, the condition of the workplace and the nature of employment, with the aim of stimulating greater employer demand for higher skills. Moreover, there are highly contradictory tendencies emerging from Brexit. On the one hand, there could be increased emphasis on creating greater skills levels amongst the indigenous workforce across the UK. This, however, could be completely overshadowed by an emerging political divorce due to Scotland's and Northern Ireland's desire to remain in the EU and deep-seated Welsh political apprehensions that they will be disproportionately disadvantaged economically. These are the balance of factors to be analysed as we commence this important project.

The Inquiry research approach – modelling conditions for policy learning

The Inquiry, through its structure and modes of investigation, aims to model some of the conditions for policy learning. These include a common and topical focus (FE and skills development); an emphasis on the importance of national contexts reflected in the location of the seminars; inputs and participation from a wide variety of stakeholders in each context; a focus on differing interpretations of some UK-wide developments and an accent on information and conceptual exchanges aimed at improving understanding of how practice and policy can be developed in differing circumstances.

To this end, each of the seminars will address a number of themes. These include:

- the specificities of further education in each of the national contexts (e.g. the differences and similarities in the ways that FE and skills is funded across the UK; the effects of recent FE college reorganisation and approaches to governance);
- the role of policy levers; performance measures and national agencies such as the inspectorate and awarding organisations);
- the role of social partners including employers; local government; higher education and teacher unions and professional associations;
- how divergence is impacting on employers and individuals in relation to FE and skills;
- interpretations of the development of technical and vocational qualifications; apprenticeships and skills development in workplaces.
- underlying economic and political developments and the ways in which these are informing the education, training and skills terrains.

In order to obtain a rounded and grounded picture of the factors affecting further education and skills development in each of the four countries, the participants in each of the seminars will comprise policy makers (e.g. civil servants, civil society organisations, regulators, awarding bodies, local/regional authorities), employers and employer organisations, particularly those operating UK-wide; unions and professional associations; researchers and academics; education and training providers.

As part of the process of deliberation, each seminar will include papers from both academics and policy-makers and will be held in either a university specialising in technical education or a further education college. This will provide an opportunity for participation in the discussion by a wide range of stakeholders and for demonstration of practice if appropriate and manageable.

The papers and discussion will form the basis of a series of six short briefing papers, each of which will be produced shortly following the relevant seminar. These will be summarised within a final report to be written by July 2018 and consideration will be given as to whether there was material for a more substantial publication (e.g. special issue of a journal, book).

Conceptual issues

How far do you agree with the conceptual framework laid out in this paper in relation to the processes of convergence/divergence; the definition of policy learning; and the idea of a 'UK laboratory' for policy learning?

Some initial practical questions

1. What should our working definition of FE and skills be? What is in and out of scope?
2. What are the roles of the Country Experts and the Expert Rapporteur?
3. If each of the four country seminars are to consider the same themes, what should these be?
4. Where should each of the four country seminars be held and when?
5. Who should be invited? What size of seminar are we looking for? How do we ensure balance of policy-makers, researchers and practitioners?
6. What form should the briefing papers take and what roles and responsibilities do each of the Project Team members have in relation to them?

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