

**Further Education and Skills Across the
UK: New Opportunities for Policy
Learning?
An Introduction to the Special Issue**

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An Introduction to the Special Issue

This Introduction provides a contextual and conceptual background to the papers in this Special Issue, which are based on the findings from a research inquiry entitled ‘Policy and policy learning across the four countries of the UK: the case of further education and skills’. The Inquiry was directed by Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours (UCL Institute of Education, England) with the support of three country experts – Jim Gallacher (Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland), David James (University of Cardiff, Wales), Tracy Irwin (Ulster University, Northern Ireland) - and a Special Adviser, Ewart Keep (University of Oxford, England). The Inquiry was funded and supported by the Edge Foundation, City and Guilds and the Department for Education (DfE) in England. These partners were directly involved at all stages of the Inquiry, which took the form of six seminars, one in each of the four countries – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - with a specific focus on that country’s further education (FE) and skills policy and practice, and a further two in London to begin and conclude the programme. The series as a whole, which involved a broad mix of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners, was framed around a central 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?

The Value of Home International Comparisons

The Project began from the premise that, while national governments in the UK have actively looked to international examples when devising FE and skills policy, much less use has been

made of cross-UK comparisons. This has been the case even though England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland possess a broadly common labour market, students travel across borders for employment and higher education and three of the countries (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) share qualifications. Scotland has historically pursued a different curriculum and qualifications system. Although each nation's cultural, social and political life has diverged to some extent as a result of democratic devolution in the late 1990s in the cases of Scotland and Wales and 2007 in the case of Northern Ireland, this Project took the view that the UK might still provide a useful 'laboratory' for policy learning in the area of FE and skills.

Despite the existence of a rich conceptual framework - 'home international comparisons' (e.g. Raffe *et al.* 1999; Raffe, Croxford, and Brannen 2001, Raffe and Byrne 2005) - for addressing these issues, comparisons between the policies and practical approaches being taken in FE and skills in each of the four countries and the assumptions and principles that underpin them remain 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 space for 'policy learning'. This is becoming particularly important in the area of skills, vocational education and the role of colleges and other FE providers, because of the new context of Brexit with a potentially increased emphasis on developing high value-added enterprises and an appropriately educated and skilled UK workforce that is able to compete internationally outside the EU.

Convergence and Divergence Across the Countries of the UK

The geopolitical focus for this research is the four countries of the UK. We consider that the time is ripe for cross-UK comparisons of FE and skills due to a number of common developments occurring across the UK in terms of policy in this area. These include the regionalisation of FE colleges in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and Area-Based Reviews in England; a new apprenticeship model in England and the UK-wide Apprenticeship Levy; and curriculum and qualifications changes in all countries. However, as we will see, these common developments are taking place in very different national contexts in which there have been processes of policy divergence underway, particularly since the start of democratic devolution in 1999.

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 share a 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, a flexible labour market, low levels of work-based initial vocational education and training and an internationalised higher education system.

However, they have been 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 lie the processes of democratic devolution

that have provided spaces (or, in the case of Scotland more 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 affects Anglo-Scottish relations in particular.

The processes of divergence had, since the election of a Conservative-led Coalition Government in 2010, appeared until recently to be gathering pace. ‘Managed divergence’, that took place under the New Labour Governments directly after democratic devolution (1999-2010), saw a situation in which commonality and difference were more finely balanced. This gave way to ‘accelerated divergence’ between England on the one hand and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on the other, due principally to growing political and policy differences in particular areas of education and its governance between the three devolved governments and the previous Westminster Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government (Hodgson *et al.* 2011). In terms of political orientation, England was 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). However, the Referendum decision in 2016 to leave the EU is now placing greater emphasis on national skills development, which could be seen as a new force for convergence.

The Concepts of Policy Learning and the ‘UK Policy Laboratory’

A key question is whether, how far and in what ways the UK represents a ‘laboratory’ 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 and 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. A 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 the Programme for International Student Assessment (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 simply policy elites;
- a willingness to share knowledge rather than using international comparison for national performance advantage;

- processes of governance and policy development that are slower and more deliberative rather than a focus on policy speed and novelty.

Recent research, however, had suggested 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 upper secondary education curriculum and school organisation. Nevertheless, this UK-wide Inquiry was based on the speculation that the area of FE and skills might 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.

The Inquiry's Approach – Modelling Conditions for Policy Learning

The Inquiry, through its structure and modes of investigation, aimed to model some of the conditions for policy learning. These included a common and topical focus (FE and skills development); an emphasis on the importance of national contexts reflected in the location of the seminars and the use of country experts; 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 might be developed in differing circumstances.

To this end, each of the seminars addressed a number of themes. These included:

- the specificities of FE 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 national and international 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 FE and skills development in each of the four countries, the participants in the seminars comprised 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. Moreover, at least one seminar took place in each of the four countries, allowing for ‘learning visits’ to FE and skills providers, with an additional one in Jersey, a UK Protectorate. In effect, the seminar series tried to create a ‘mini-laboratory’ for UK-wide policy learning.

Policy Learning – Challenges and Opportunities Facing the Four Countries of the UK

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 53 millions) compared to the much smaller Scotland (5 millions), Wales (3 millions) and Northern Ireland (just under 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 decide its political complexion.

Nevertheless, despite size differences, we regard these ‘home international’ comparisons as 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, FE and skills?

At the same time, the processes of convergence/divergence are not uniform between the different countries. This is due to factors concerning country size, education policy tradition, education performance, and the balance of dependence/independence in relation to England. In the context of these highly differentiated national situations, the key issues were understanding how the new FE and skills agendas were emerging in each national case; how they were being interpreted in the differing contexts; and the policy learning challenges and opportunities that have arisen in this particular ‘UK Policy Laboratory’ seen from the perspective of the respective countries.

England – the issue for England and policy learning derives from its dominance, its political orientation and governance relations. 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 upper secondary education qualifications for Wales and Northern Ireland 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 upper secondary education swerved towards what has been termed ‘an extreme Anglo Saxon model’ in the area of general education (Hodgson and Spours 2014) that isolated it from the other countries of the UK and reduced the desire of its policy makers to see these countries as a source of policy learning. This divergence, however, has not been reproduced to the same extent in the area of technical and vocational education, although the governance structures in England – the emphasis on institutional autonomy and the very much reduced role for local authorities – put the largest country of the UK out on a limb. But even here, as

we will see, there are changes afoot with a new policy emphasis on devolution to city regions and combined local authorities. Despite obvious and ongoing asymmetries, we will argue that in the field of FE and skills, England may have the capacity and even willingness to re-enter the UK Policy Laboratory, particularly as it has a number of reforms underway that require expertise in this area.

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 upper secondary education system which has been shaped over many years. Based on a broad curriculum up to the age of 15, up to five subjects (Highers) are taken at the age of 16-17 and selected from a wide range of courses. The vast majority of young Scots entering higher education progress to Scottish universities, although just over 20 per cent of undergraduate level students study in colleges, mainly on Higher National Certificates or Diplomas (HNC/Ds) (Croxford and Raffe 2014; Gallacher 2017). 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, based in Education Scotland, 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, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) that it successfully promotes globally (Howieson and Raffe 2013). The policy learning challenge for Scotland arises from both its independence from England and from its own perception of

being a ‘policy exporter’. It has continued to have a fruitful dialogue with Wales and Northern Ireland throughout the ‘divergence years’, but as a member of the UK Policy Laboratory there is the challenge as to whether its policy makers feel they have anything to learn from other countries of the UK in comparison, for example, to the lure of the Nordic systems.

Wales – the challenge for Wales and policy learning concerns the tension between its educational dependence on its large neighbour, England - notably access to higher education and the continued use of common qualifications – and the desire to strike out in a more social democratic direction. Accordingly, since 1999 and democratic devolution, Wales has attempted to create a distinctive approach to upper secondary education with its ‘14-19 Learning Pathways’ reform process (Welsh Government 2014), which began in 2004, and by establishing a Welsh Baccalaureate Qualifications Framework that encompasses all types of upper secondary education qualifications and focuses on building skills for study, life and work (Qualifications Wales 2018). These have used English qualifications (GCSEs, A Levels and vocational awards), but Wales has not always gone along with Westminster Government policy and has refused to implement the Government’s recent GCSE and A Level reforms (Gov.UK 2018), 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 as in England, retaining instead an important regulatory role for local authorities with an emphasis on institutional collaboration rather than competition (Welsh Assembly Government 2009). 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, the

Hazelkorn Report (2016) argues 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.

Northern Ireland - there are a distinct set of issues regarding the context of Northern Ireland – 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 upper secondary education curriculum. Despite a close historical affinity to the English system, particularly by the Unionist community, in recent years Northern Ireland has embarked on curriculum reform that has similarities to that in Scotland. The revised National Curriculum (CCEA 2007) seeks to promote broad skills and areas of study that can assist young people in the labour market and is supported by an Entitlement Framework (Department of Education Northern Ireland 2018) that emphasises 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, Northern Ireland, 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. The policy learning challenges for Northern Ireland arise from its balancing act - its continued dependence on England while recognizing that it has much to learn from Scotland and Wales as well as its own national agenda. It also faces the current challenge of not having a functioning devolved government at Stormont, although this has swung the spotlight back on the educational practitioners and departmental officials to take forward a policy learning agenda.

The Articles in This Special Issue

Further Education in England: At the Crossroads Between a National Competitive Sector and a Locally Collaborative System?

This article describes and analyses the FE and skills landscape in England using a historical and system lens. The authors identify six phases of FE and skills policy since Incorporation in the early 1990s and suggest that recent developments may herald the beginnings of a new phase for FE and skills in England in 2018. They argue that the possible transition from a distinct national competitive sector towards a more integrated and collaborative local/regional system will depend on a range of contingent factors, including building on the aftermath of Area-Based Reviews and an enhanced role for local and regional government. They conclude that there are differing scenarios for policy learning from an English perspective depending on the degree of convergence with the other three countries of the UK, which are already taking a more regionally co-ordinated direction.

FE and Skills in Scotland: The Implications of a Policy-Led and ‘Managed’ Approach?

This article considers the implications of a ‘managed’ approach to skills policy in Scotland, in which Government policy and the role of national institutional frameworks can be seen to be influential, and which contrasts with the more marketised approach that has been a central aspect of policy in England. National policies have led to a major restructuring of the college sector in Scotland, with a programme of mergers and regionalisation and an aim of providing more seamless journeys for learners from school, through tertiary education, to work. The ways in which these national policies and frameworks have shaped provision in a number of key areas, including responses to youth unemployment, apprenticeship programmes, and the provision of higher level vocational education and training, are considered. The strengths

and limitations of the distinctive approaches taken in Scotland are analysed in terms of their contribution to meeting the changing training needs of the workforce in the 21st century.

Discussion of the distinctively policy-led and ‘managed’ approach to the skills agenda provides the context in which to debate the opportunities for policy learning within the UK.

Learning in and Learning from FE and Skills Policy in Wales: A Sociological View

In the context of devolution as a process, this paper argues that there is a distinctively Welsh flavour to FE and Skills policy, with certain values, principles and expectations clearly visible in legislation, in policy and in the mechanisms for realising and informing policy. However, the nature and formation of policy needs to be understood both in terms of ‘internal’ patterns or shifts and in terms of its relationship to parallel policy developments in England. Consideration is given to ‘structural’ aspects and significant changes in the ‘economic narrative’, and also to the reflection of certain values in policy and policy mechanisms. It is argued that policy learning of a sort visible in the realm of economic innovation is not yet apparent in the FE and Skills arena in Wales, where an avoidance of key features of English policy remains a touchstone. Bourdieusian concepts of relationality and field are particularly helpful in appreciating these issues. The paper pays particular attention to the prospects for the realisation of a new vision of a coherent post-compulsory education and training *system* in Wales. At the time of writing, this development is reaching the end of a consultation process. The paper argues that there are many difficulties yet to be overcome before we know if such a system is a realistic prospect.

FE and Skills in Northern Ireland: Policy Initiatives in a Post-Conflict Society

This paper provides a contextual background to the FE sector in Northern Ireland outlining key features of the provision and presenting a quantitative overview of its position as a major

educational provider in Northern Ireland. An analysis of the unique historical and cultural background is presented, illustrating how the FE model has been impacted by the Northern Ireland conflict and has adapted in a post-conflict environment. The wider national educational landscape is discussed, charting student progression pathways within a fractured educational system. Key policy frameworks underpinning sectoral development are outlined, showing how many policy initiatives have been ‘borrowed’ from those in the English context. The article conceptualises emergent trends within a distinctive social and economic model and highlights some of the more innovative developments such as the ‘Entitlement Framework’ and problem-based learning pedagogies. Using Belfast Metropolitan College and the South Eastern Regional College as case studies, the article illustrates how colleges can become anchor institutions in their communities, pivotal in community regeneration and social cohesion. The Northern Ireland model faces many of the same challenges as those in England, Wales and Scotland (academic elitism, academic drift, weak industrial base, unhelpful qualification structures emanating from England and marketization), but the article concludes that as a small-scale national model, the Northern Ireland system has the potential to positively influence FE policy and practice in other parts of the UK.

FE and Skills – Is the UK Laboratory Open for Policy Learning?

This article begins by returning to the research question which underpinned the UK FE and Skills Inquiry: *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?* It then elaborates on the concepts of the ‘UK Policy Laboratory’ and ‘Expansive Policy Learning’ that have been explored in different ways in the earlier articles in the Special Issue, suggesting that the area of FE and skills currently provides a fruitful terrain for policy learning. While England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland each has different reasons

for engaging in policy learning, the authors argue that there are sufficient major challenges that are pertinent across the whole of the UK to make the idea of a UK Policy Laboratory at least a possible way forward. These challenges, it is asserted, essentially converge around the subordinate status of technical and vocational education and training when compared with the general education route that dominates in all four countries. Moreover, the seminar series identified a number of ‘interesting practices’ in different parts of the UK that might form elements of a ‘common project’. The article concludes by setting out three conditions that are likely to be influential in the success or otherwise of a UK Policy Laboratory.

Response

The response article will stress the importance of the national policy contexts across the four nations. In particular, it will note that Scotland has a joined-up set of policies around inclusive growth, fair work, and the integration of skills and economic development and business support. Wales has the Future Generations Act which sets a series of over-arching policy steers and constraints, as well as encoding what could be termed an ‘ideological envelope’ within which policy can be formulated. In addition, Wales has now followed Scotland with the establishment of both a Fair Work Commission and a Digital Innovation Review and their impacts on employment, work and skills. England, by contrast, has none of these things. Policy around skills continues to be heavily siloed and is still trying to sort out relative priorities between competing notions of market (dominant strand) and a residual hankering after some kind of planning (Skills Advisory Panels, managing stresses in the FE marketplace via interventions). There is no wider progressive agenda against which to craft policy. The article will also underline the contrast between a systems-approach (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) and a market approach (England) which produces radically different dynamics and possibilities. The English investment in markets as the driving

mechanism for policy comes with a heavy price, and despite ABRs, the college sector and FE/vocational provision more widely are extremely unstable and being wracked by scandals and institutional failures/crises. In terms of policy learning, the argument will be that while it may be possible for the three ‘fringe’ nations to learn from one another, and for there to be learning across all four at a local or city region level, it is hard to see what would motivate or enable such learning in any way that involved the current UK government. If the government changes, there is the ‘promise’ of local democratic accountability and a re-engineering of governance, but to date little is known about the form or impact of this.

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