

**Further education in England:
at the crossroads between a national, competitive
sector
and a locally collaborative system?**

Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours

UCL Institute of Education, London

Corresponding author: Ken Spours – k.spours@ucl.ac.uk

UCL Institute of Education

20 Bedford Way

London WC1H 0AL

Abstract

During the 25 years since Incorporation, when further education (FE) colleges were taken out of local government control, FE in England has been shaped by processes of marketization to become a competitive national sector that has increasingly diverged from the more 'collaborative system logic' of the other three countries of the UK. However, following recent government reforms, FE in England appears to have reached a crossroads with the opportunity to participate in a more collaborative skills-based landscape at the local and sub-regional levels. This article brings together evidence from historical and international comparative system analysis, a series of UK-wide seminars and in-depth research on the Area-Based Review of FE colleges to assess the strategic direction of FE in England at this critical juncture. We argue that English FE providers can take advantage of these trends to make a transition from a reactive, competitive national sector towards a more collaborative, regional and sub-regional system focused on inclusive economic and skills development. The article concludes that the potential for cross-UK policy learning depends on whether FE in England gradually transitions towards a more collaborative future that could bring it closer to FE and skills systems in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Key words: further education, skills, localities and regions, England, policy, collaboration

Introduction

England is different from the rest of the UK in terms of size and governance

England is by far the largest country in the UK with a population of over 53 million. It has a dynamic economy and high levels of employment. However, these conditions vary significantly within and across regions. London and the South East are the wealthiest and most economically active areas, whereas the coastal regions in some parts of the country suffer considerable social deprivation and unemployment. While there are many large companies that have their headquarters in England, again particularly in cities, as with the whole of the UK economy England has a preponderance of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Unlike Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, England does not have its own assembly but is administered under the UK Parliament at Westminster. The area of FE and skills is located under the Department for Education and is funded through the Education and Skills Funding Agency. However, from 2019 some of the Adult Education Budget will be devolved to a small number of Mayoral Combined Authorities (e.g. Greater Manchester) and the Greater London Authority in London (HMG 2017). The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspects FE and Skills providers under its Common Inspection Framework. The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) regulates qualifications, examinations and assessment, although this task in relation to vocational education and training will be passed to the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) in April 2019 when it will be known as the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. Currently the IfA ensures high-quality apprenticeship standards and advises government on funding for each standard: it will continue to fulfil this function alongside its new duties. England does not now have an

independent curriculum body. A number of awarding bodies (e.g. City and Guilds, Pearson) design, develop, deliver and award qualifications in the FE and skills sector working within Ofqual regulations.

The English FE Sector - colleges and other FE providers

Colleges were incorporated and taken out of the control of local government in the early 1990s and are now accountable to their governing bodies. There were 266 colleges in England in August 2018¹ comprising 179 general FE; 61 sixth form; 14 land-based; 10 specialist designated, and two art and design. The total budget for colleges in England was seven billion in 2015/6. These colleges educate 2.2 million people, the majority of whom are 19+ (1.4 million) and employ 120,000 full-time equivalent staff of whom half are teachers. College provision is highly diverse. In addition to full-time and part-time academic and vocational courses for 16-18 year olds, this total includes, 313,000 on an apprenticeship through a college; 16,000 14-15 year olds on specialist pre-vocational provision; and 151,000 studying higher education. One third of English students aged under 19 who enter higher education through the centralised Universities and Colleges Admissions Service studied at an FE college and colleges offer the majority of Higher National Certificates, Higher National Diplomas and Foundation Degrees (AoC 2018). In addition to colleges, in 2017 there were 490 publically funded independent training providers offering FE and Skills programmes (Ofsted 2017) that together comprise the English FE sector.

¹ A number of colleges are still in the process of merging as a result of the Area-Based Review process undertaken between 2015-2017 (House of Commons, 2018a).

Apprenticeships and working with employers

There are two types of apprenticeship programmes in England: frameworks and standards-based. The former type is gradually being phased out as new standards are developed. Standards-based apprenticeships have been designed by trailblazer groups of employers to reflect the needs of specific occupations. Unlike framework apprenticeships they are not qualifications-led (IfA, 2018). In April 2017, an apprenticeship levy of 0.5 per cent of the salary bill (minus £15,000 annually) was introduced for all employers with a salary bill of over three million. In England this pays for apprenticeship training and assessment for levy paying employers. Those who do not pay a levy have to fund 10 per cent of these costs, with the Government paying the rest (HMG 2018a).

The Government has a target of three million apprenticeships by 2020. In 2016/17 there were 912,000 participating in apprenticeships in England, 12,800 more than the year before. However, there were only 491,000 starts, which is 18,100 fewer than the previous year: 46 per cent of these were aged 25+, 29 per cent were aged 19-24 and 25 per cent were under 19. The significant reason for the decline are the difficulties faced by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in engaging the policy changes (Hodgson et al. 2017) and the more general lack of understanding amongst most employers about the new apprenticeship model (Pye Tait Consulting 2018). Of all apprenticeships, 53 per cent were at Intermediate Level, 40 per cent at Advanced Level and seven per cent at Higher Level, with the majority in the service sectors. Older learners and those on Intermediate and Advanced Level programmes thus predominate in apprenticeships. Women (54%) outnumber men on apprenticeships and

this has been the case since 2010/11. A total of 271, 700 participants successfully completed an apprenticeship in 2015/16, up 10,800 on the previous year (HoC 2018a).

There is no statutory social partnership arrangement between employers, governments and unions in relation to education and training in England as there is in some other European countries (Clarke and Winch 2007). Nor do all sectors have sector skills councils or strong employer associations. However, employers have been increasingly exhorted and incentivised by government to play an active part in FE and skills in England. Recent examples include: involvement in the design of apprenticeship standards and encouragement to take on apprenticeships through the levy; participation in the design of the new T (Technical) Level programmes for 16-19 year olds and exhortation to offer the 45-day work placements these will involve (DBIS/DfE 2016). For FE and skills providers, the need to form partnerships with employers has always been important. This is increasingly the case as qualifications and programmes of study at all levels demand work experience or placement for completion and as fast-changing working practices resulting from technological advances require up-to-date curricula. However, building strong partnerships between employers and providers remains a vexed issue (Hodgson et al. 2018a).

Summary and argument

Due to the population size of England and the dominance of its economy, the role of Westminster Government in setting policy in relation to vocational education and training, and the evolution of the English FE sector as one framed by institutional autonomy, English FE sits uneasily in relation to more centrally steered and regionalised FE systems in the other three countries of the UK (Hodgson et al. 2018b). These have followed somewhat different

paths of development since democratic devolution in Scotland² and Wales in 1999 and in Northern Ireland since 2007, partially off-setting the power of Westminster education policies, but still linked by a UK economy (see individual articles on these countries in this special issue).

This dominance/difference observation brings us to our basic argument - that in order for significant policy learning to take place across the UK there will have to be greater convergence between England and the other three countries. Given that the smaller countries of the UK are gradually moving towards more co-ordinated regional systems, this would mean that English FE would have to continue its hesitant journey from being a competitive and reactive national sector to becoming a strategic part of local and regional learning and skills systems – referred to elsewhere as High Progression and Skills Ecosystems (Hodgson and Spours 2016a). An analysis of recent policy in England suggests that this trajectory may be possible, provided that national policy narratives and steering mechanisms (e.g. funding and inspection) begin to prioritise collaboration over competition; the roles of local and regional government continue to be strengthened; and that local networks of providers, employers and other social partners grow to address their pressing economic and social agendas.

Research/theoretical approach and key research questions

Recent developments in English FE are best seen within the history of Incorporation since 1992/3 that set FE colleges in England on a highly marketized path (Hodgson 2015). It was also an era that saw the rise of central government policy steering, particularly through funding and inspection, and the virtual removal of the role of local authorities in FE. History, as we will see, continues to weigh heavily.

² The Scottish education system followed its own path well before democratic devolution.

The article, therefore, starts with a historical and system analysis that attempts to follow the evolutionary path of the English FE sector as it has navigated different political administrations and governance regimes since. To chart the trajectories of English FE over the past 25 years an analytical tool is used to theorise the relationship between economic and political dimensions of system and college governance (see Figure 1). The diagram also situates the FE systems of the other countries of the UK in 2018 in order to establish a means of comparison.

The theoretical framework, illustrated in Figure 1, uses two dimensions - private/public (economic) and centralised/de-centralised (political). These are represented by two intersecting axes (adapted from Newman 2001: 97; Pullen and Clifton 2016: 17). The centralised/decentralized axis is a political continuum that represents tension between top-down managerialism and more devolved forms of power within the modern expanded state. There has been a constant tension between the poles of this axis resulting from a struggle between forces for centralisation or decentralisation, with the centralising tendency having been more dominant over the past four decades despite rhetoric from successive governments that they wish to devolve powers to the local level (Hodgson and Spours 2012; Keep 2016). The private/public axis is an economic continuum that has been shifting over the same period; in this case to a more marketised and less public economic life (Keep 2018).

This analytical approach has been brought up-to-date with evidence from the six UK FE and Skills seminars described in the Introductory article to this special issue. These seminars reported on the implications of the impact of recent policy in England that has included a greater focus on technical and vocational education (TVET); an emphasis on closer relations

with employers to tackle skills shortages and encourage upskilling; targets for the growth of apprenticeships; devolution of the skills budget to local and regional authorities; and Area-Based Reviews of FE colleges (see DBIS/DfE 2016; HMG 2017). An analysis of the potential impact of these policies has been used to suggest that the current location of English FE may be moving away from a marketized/competitive model to one which requires greater local and regional collaboration to support the TVET agenda. The degree to which this is happening, however, varies from locality to locality (see Keep 2018).

Our theoretical approach is completed by utilising the convergence/divergence analysis employed in the opening article of this special issue. We argue that opportunities for policy learning in FE and skills have been enhanced by virtue of greater sharing of the vocational agenda across the UK and that this can be contrasted to the divergences between the three smaller countries of the UK and England in relation to general education, associated with the Coalition and Conservative government reforms since 2010. Put another way, significant policy learning across the UK context requires more convergence than divergence and it is this ‘goldilocks zone’ (not too different but interestingly so) that provides the basis for fruitful ongoing dialogue and learning (please see the Introductory article in this special issue for a more detailed discussion of these concepts).

These analytical approaches have led to three key research questions regarding the evolution and location of FE in England:

- What are the historical and system factors that have shaped the role of FE in England?
- How might the system be characterised in 2018?
- What might its future trajectory be and to what extent might this support policy learning across the UK?

Historical, system and policy contexts – 1992-2018

The historical trajectories of English FE

FE colleges in the post-war period were known as the ‘local tech’ – a place associated with vocational skills development; practical qualifications (e.g. City and Guilds) and apprenticeships. The vocational skills system was not a mass one as in Germany because in England a large proportion of young people went straight from school into unskilled work; nevertheless, while relatively small, FE had a clear vocational identity. It also existed at the lower end of a vocational ladder that included local polytechnics at the higher end – both under the control of local authorities (Hodgson et al. 2015).

All of this was to change in the 1980s and early 1990s as the youth labour market collapsed and post-16 educational participation expanded. This educational tectonic change provided the context within which FE colleges increasingly took on a ‘social inclusion role’, as they catered through prevocational and low-level vocational provision for young people unable to access the academic track, selective vocational courses or work (Hodgson and Spours 2015). FE’s role in education system expansion was given a ‘market twist’ in the early 1990s, as polytechnics became ‘autonomous’ universities and FE colleges became Incorporated institutions – neither fully public nor fully private organisations. Instead, FE was seen to comprise a distinct national sector. In this marketised scenario, however, colleges never became fully autonomous institutions but, instead, were heavily steered by national policy levers and a centralized funding council that replaced the role of local authorities (Coffield et al. 2008; Fletcher et al. 2015a).

Despite becoming part of a growing national sector, FE colleges and their staff found it difficult to establish their own professional identity (Fletcher et al. 2015b). This was due not only to the turbulence around lecturer conditions of service in the 1990s, but also the ways in which FE colleges were shaped by the wider dynamics of the neoliberal economic and educational era. This included the rising role of competitive schooling and of universities, together with the relative absence of local employers, as the economy became less industrial and more financialized. The relentless drive of colleges to recruit students could also be seen as a continuation of their historical local role, but one that also served to compromise their relationship with employers and the local economy (Bailey and Unwin 2014). The relationship between colleges, the economy and skills also ebbed and flowed according to the nature of governments and their policy orientation to FE. But throughout this era and to the present day, their main contribution has been seen as the ‘suppliers of skills’ to employers rather than as true partners in skills formation (Hodgson et al. 2018b).

A historical analysis of the English FE sector can be seen to have evolved through several phases since Incorporation in 1992/3.

- Phase 1 (1992-2000) *Centralised/market approach 1*. - the early Incorporation phase that saw heavy steering by the national Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) together with an emphasis on individual college autonomy and competition to reduce costs.
- Phase 2 (2000-2004) *The ‘planned’ arms-length government approach* - which relied heavily on quasi-autonomous, non-governmental organisations (quangos), such as the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), to carry out central government policy, effectively reducing the autonomy and competitiveness of FE colleges.

- Phase 3 (2004-2010) *Co-ordinated/contestability approach* - while still centralized, this phase of the LSC favoured more ‘contestability’ between FE providers and marked the return of a mild marketisation. This phase was also marked by increased investment in FE – both capital spend and the growth of college budgets.
- Phase 4 (2010-15) *Centralised/market approach 2*. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition era was characterized by the ‘bonfire of the quangos’, including the LSC, and increasing support for new competitive post-16 providers. This period was also marked by central steering via the national inspectorate -Ofsted - and an imposed austerity that eventually created a funding crisis in the FE college sector requiring rationalization – hence the need for Area-Based Reviews (HMG 2015) that promoted FE college mergers.
- Phase 5 (2016-18) *Limited devolution* - during the Conservative Administration (2015-) English ABRs were introduced alongside preparation for the devolution of the adult education budget in Mayoral Combined Authorities and the GLA (Mayor of London, 2018); the strengthening and rationalization of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) (HMG 2018); and plans for the introduction of Local Industrial Strategies and Local Agreements (HMG 2017); thus signalling the potential for greater collaboration between FE and skills providers and a more co-ordinated local and regional approach.

The analysis contained in Figure 1 also suggests that the ABR process, together with the more recent policy initiatives noted in Phase 5, represents a potential shift in the character of English FE away from a strong marketization approach to a possible Phase 6 focused on the aftermath of ABRs. However, compared to the other countries of the UK, that might be located in the top-right quadrant, it is not yet a discernably coherent, planned and collaborative FE system.

Figure 1 around here

This historical perspective provides an explanation regarding the paradoxes of English FE that persist to this day – it is perceived as marginal to the education system (compared with schools and universities) yet continually socially and economically important; unstable yet resilient due to FE’s ability to react and respond to central steering; and conflicted by its competing roles and relationships nationally and locally, but still seeking to build its vocational mission.

Furthermore, despite having a highly-committed workforce that chooses to work in relatively disadvantageous conditions, the multiple roles English FE has had to develop in reaction to powerful forces around it have contributed to a weakened sense of professional identity. The paradoxes of English FE today could also be seen in broader political terms – education institutions that have mild social democratic aims, but have been trying to achieve these through largely neoliberal means. The key question is whether in these paradoxical situations, FE in England is about to enter a new logic or whether it is simply experiencing another phase of the historical logic. In what follows, we suggest that this hangs in the balance.

The English education and training landscape 2010-2016 – FE in retreat?

The wider historical and political landscape provides an important backdrop for analysing the role of FE colleges in England in the recent period. Unsurprisingly, most colleges in the UK are to be found in England. However, national and numerical dominance does not necessarily signal the UK dominance of English FE in a wider political or educational sense.

As we have seen from the seminar series, the role of FE in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has been very much influenced by their respective national contexts. Moreover, in England, and despite some signs that government now recognises the important skills role of FE, the FE sector has been through a period of retrenchment and falling levels of participation. The proportion of 16-18 year olds attending general FE colleges in England has fallen slightly in recent years compared with participation trends in schools, sixth form colleges and higher education) (DfE 2018a), whereas the decline in adult participation has been more dramatic (DfE 2018b). And this is despite the fact that FE makes a major contribution to achieving qualifications outcomes at Levels 2 and 3 by 19 (Hodgson and Spours 2013).

The FE 'stasis' in England has been largely the result of the impact of government policy since 2010 – what has been described elsewhere as an 'Extreme Anglo-Saxon Education Model' (Hodgson and Spours 2014). The concept of the 'Anglo Saxon model' (Sahlberg 2007) is based on a set of distinct education system features when compared internationally. It is characterized by the dominance of standardised curriculum and testing regimes; top-down accountability measures; and institutional competition and choice. The assertion that England has employed an extreme version of this model is based on a series of policy developments in the period 2010-2015 that were associated with Secretary of State Michael Gove. These included a more 'traditional' content and pedagogy in general education qualifications; greater external assessment in vocational qualifications; highly marketised institutional and governance arrangements with increased support for autonomous schools and a range of new education providers (e.g. Free Schools, University Technical Colleges [UTCs], Studio Schools) competing with the more traditional providers – school sixth forms and colleges - for the delivery of upper secondary education. At the same time, however,

policy and governance became even more centralised with the formation of a single ministry and funding body responsible for all phases of education, a powerful role for the national inspectorate (Ofsted) and performance tables in enforcing national reforms and the introduction of the new Institute for Apprenticeships, with ever decreasing power for local authorities and no independent curriculum body.

One of the significant outcomes of the Anglo-Saxon model, which was based and focused primarily on schools, is that it has served to isolate FE and skills providers and to deflect their attention away from locally and regionally-based collaborative strategies, both with employers and a wider range of social partners. With fast diminishing budgets and a punitive inspection and performance regime, FE and skills providers have had to focus on centrally-driven policy. Moreover, historically speaking employers in all countries of the UK have been notoriously difficult to engage in education and training (Keep 2005) due to a range of factors, including a historical deregulation culture; repeated government supply-side skills strategies; and a predominance of SMEs that struggle to undertake skills-related innovation.

The current policy framework around Brexit – a new opportunity?

However, amidst the historical power of marketisation and the recent retrenchment of FE, opportunities for a new trajectory could be seen to be emerging from the current policy context. This is associated with another phase of Conservatism – Theresa May’s ‘soft economic nationalism’ (Pearce 2016) and the Brexit scenario. The current Conservative Government has a strong focus on TVET, seeing it as an important part of its Industrial Strategy and drive for higher levels of productivity (HMG 2017). The referendum decision for Brexit has only increased the importance of this area because of concerns about a shortage of skilled and unskilled labour when the UK leaves the EU (e.g. CIPD 2017). As we have

indicated earlier, three recent major policy initiatives could be seen to support the emergence of this new trajectory: the introduction of new employer-led apprenticeship standards and an apprenticeship levy (HMG 2018a); the development of 15 new technical routes based on the new apprenticeship standards and certificated through full-time technical qualifications (T Levels) due for first delivery in 2020 (DBIS/DfE 2016); and FE Area-Based Reviews designed to reduce the number and increase the financial viability of FE colleges, together with a greater focus on working with local and regional employers (DBIS 2015). If these are taken together with the devolution of the Adult Education Budget in Mayoral Combined Authorities and the GLA (UK Government 2017); the strengthening and rationalization of LEPs (HMG 2018b); and plans for the introduction of Local Industrial Strategies and Local Agreements (HMG 2018c); there could be the opportunity for a more co-ordinated and collaborative local and regional approach to economic and skills development that suggests a central role for FE and skills providers.

The significance of these policy developments in England for policy learning in FE and skills across the UK is that they place a greater emphasis on institutional collaboration to develop TVET specialisms and to work with employers at a local and regional level. This arguably brings the English FE sector a little closer to the more collaborative system features of the other three countries of the UK that themselves have gone through phases of rationalization and regionalisation. Policy learning is thus more likely to result as the four countries debate common challenges and possible solutions.

The marketized national FE sector in England could, in fact, be seen as a series of local markets (UCL 2018), and thus the move towards a more collaborative FE system might also be conceptualized as the management of these. The degree to which this happens could, in large part, depend on the co-ordinating role of local and regional government. These

conditions are gradually emerging, albeit hesitantly and differentially across England. The devolution of the Adult Education Budget to local and regional authorities in some areas, their relationship with LEPs and the role that they have in the development of Local Industrial Strategies and Local Agreements could be interpreted as a mild resurgence of their strategic powers at a local/regional level. Together, these could constitute a local framework to guide colleges' relationships with employers and other social partners.

Alternative futures for English FE – from a competitive national sector to leadership in a collaborative and inclusive local system

The current government assumes that a smaller number of more economically viable FE colleges with the addition of a few Institutes of Technology represents a new future for FE in England (Boles 2015). Viewed historically and systemically, however, it could also look like just staggering on. Despite the fact that policy makers in England still appear to favour competition between education providers, they were forced to confront the failure of the market model to produce efficient and viable FE colleges. Hence the Area Based Reviews which resulted in larger FE college formations. However, these will be surrounded by a plethora of smaller competing and isolated institutions – freestanding colleges not part of a larger grouping, school sixth forms, sixth form colleges, independent training providers and SMEs – still potentially constituting an inefficient and ineffective skills landscape.

Amidst the contradictions it is possible, however, to see an emerging alternative future for FE in England; moving from a market to a collaborative logic. Figure 2 below summarises the type of shifts from one logic to another along a number of related dimensions. Some of the are more realizable in the current policy environment, while others are contingent on wider political and governance developments.

Figure 2 around here

The first dimension concerns how colleges see themselves. The shift will depend on how far England's colleges perceive their futures tied up with a strong sense of local/regional economic, social and educational mission and their role as connective and inclusive learner progression and vocational hubs. In this role they would be contributing to what have been referred to as local 'High Progression and Skills Ecosystems' (Hodgson and Spours 2016a). These are conceptualized as networks of different social partners (e.g. colleges, schools, training providers, local authorities, higher education institutions, employers and other civil society partners) in a local or sub-regional area developing increasing degrees of collaboration through the identification of a local common mission and bringing their respective specialisations and functions to address this.

Allied to this is another required shift, this time from the role of colleges being seen as the suppliers of skills to one in which they work directly with employers to co-produce skills in the locality/region to jointly support the development of the local/regional skills formation. This does not mean that colleges stop supplying skills, but that they increasingly see themselves as partners working with others to co-design, co-produce and co-deliver TVET (Hodgson et al. 2018a)

This kind of collaborative behaviour will not be effectively achieved in a policy vacuum; rather it will require assistance from government to devolve more responsibilities and functions to the local and regional levels so that FE and skills providers and their social partners have new discretionary powers. As we have seen earlier, the history of educational

governance in England has not only been one of marketisation, but also of centralization.

The recent moves towards greater devolution to localities and regions in the area of FE and skills described in the previous section of this article, however, suggest possibilities for a more positive policy climate for collaboration.

National government will also need to provide a regulatory framework that incentivizes employers to recruit qualified labour as well as for colleges to collaborate. It is possible that the Brexit environment will encourage government to move away from the orthodoxies of flexible labour markets and towards an emphasis on homegrown skills development. The Apprenticeship Levy could be seen as an early example of this, although it was not introduced as part of a widespread recognition of the need for a more regulated labour market.

The movement from one FE logic to another will also have implications for the type of education professionalism required. While it will be important that those working in the FE and skills system continue to fulfil the function of dual professionals, that is experts in both their occupation and as teachers, they will also need a greater emphasis on the ability to work beyond the boundaries of the institution and towards the wider geographical, policy and economic landscape. Elsewhere we have referred to this as ‘triple professionalism’ (Spours and Hodgson 2013, Gannon 2014) in recognition of this third dimension.

Given the complexity of these changes and their reciprocal nature, it is also important to recognise that the processes of change will have to be gradual. Although Figure 2 highlights the distinctions between ‘sector’ and ‘system’, it is not intended to be read as suggesting a radical break between one and the other. Rather it holds out the possibility of a gradual move

towards 'system features' that will ultimately redefine the essential character of English FE, that is less focused on its distinctive role as a flexible and reactive national sector and more on its connective function in a local and regional system. In earlier work we have described this as a 'post-incorporation model' for FE colleges (Hodgson and Spours 2015).

In 2018, a key question that needs to be addressed is what the wider contingent circumstances are that can help with this transition – notably how far the outcomes of ABRs, together with the other more recent local and regional policies designed to support the building of relations between colleges, employers, local authorities and wider stakeholders, are strong enough to overcome ingrained assumptions and practices associated with the history of marketization and centralization. A further question is how far the other social partners within localities will be prepared to change the way that they operate to overcome interests for the maintenance of marketized and centralized arrangements. FE and skills providers cannot enact this agenda on their own.

Policy learning in divergent and convergent scenarios

If the identification of common problems is considered to be a source of potential policy learning, it follows that policy learning processes are difficult to realise in divergent situations when national systems appear to be organized according to increasingly different principles and assumptions. In this situation, respective national policy makers may be forgiven for thinking that they have too little in common to hold a constructive conversation. This was certainly the case in the period 2010 to 2015 in the field of general education when the other countries of the UK were having to respond to and ultimately reject the academic radical reform agenda (the extreme Anglo-Saxon model described earlier). Research at the

time suggested that in the field of education policy communication at the national level between England and the three other countries had largely broken down (Hodgson and Spours 2016b).

Conversely, it is fair to assume that policy learning is more likely to occur through processes of convergence in which social partners from the four countries are able to identify relatively common problems and challenges to be addressed in their different national contexts (see Hodgson et al. 2018 for a more detailed discussion). In other words, policy learning is encouraged when characteristics of the ‘UK laboratory’ are present and ‘goldilocks’ conditions pertain (Hodgson and Spours 2016b).

Through this recent research focused on the field of FE and skills we have observed that the period of accelerated divergence under the Coalition Government era has been replaced by one of limited or mild convergence in the area of TVET since 2015.

A major theme for this special issue is what the respective systems can learn from each other in this current scenario. This poses a particular challenge from the English perspective because of its different governance position compared to the other three. At this system level, it is unlikely that in 2018 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are going to be attracted by English marketization. While it is undoubtedly true that markets and institutional competition between FE and skills providers continue to exist in the other three countries of the UK, these types of relationships do not play a dominant role in policy discourse because of the commitment of the respective governments of these three countries, in varying degrees, to a more socially inclusive and collaborative trajectory (see the articles by Gallacher and Reeves, James and Irwin in this special issue).

Nevertheless, ‘system building’ could form a zone of potential policy learning across the UK which tackles issues such as: how to create effective partnerships with employers for skills formation and co-production; relating social inclusion and high skills through building progression routes within a tertiary system involving both FE and HE providers; developing pedagogical innovation for technological change; and new local and regional forms of governance through mechanisms such as co-determined outcome agreements, overseen by central government.

If England were to play an active role in this zone then there would need to be a recognition within England itself that its marketised model has run its course and another trajectory is required that perhaps has more in common with the FE and skills experience in other parts of the UK. In other words, that England is prepared to join the UK ‘FE and skills system laboratory’ as an active partner.

A key question, therefore, is whether England can transition away from the Anglo-Saxon model that has had its starkest representations in general education and competitive schooling (Greany and Higham 2018). Here there may not be a neat form of national transition, but rather a set of more local or regional shifts according to the politics of the area or region. So, the issue of policy learning in FE and skills may also be located further down the system than the national governments level, at least for the duration of this Conservative Government. This also perhaps makes sense within the ‘UK Laboratory’ because a region in England is closer in terms of size to that of Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland and because the English regions vary considerably in terms of their economy, geography and demography. What

might work in London or in the Greater Manchester region, for example, may not be appropriate for the South West or North East of England.

Two possible scenarios and a wild card

Here there may be two possible scenarios for mutual UK-wide policy learning from the English perspective. The first scenario is one of *limited policy learning* taking place around the current reform agendas. In this it is possible that England could contribute to the UK Laboratory from its distinct position in terms of the power of Westminster reforms; from its size and the relevance of its regions and from its most recent experience of ABRs and their aftermath. Other countries of the UK may be interested, for example, in the initial experience of T Levels and how these might be adapted to their own national environments. Similarly, the new apprenticeships are likely to be an area of interest. There could also be another strand of dialogue around the experience of the newly-formed combined local authorities and how they oversee economic development and skills at the regional level. Moreover, in terms of the aftermath of ABRs, there could be a discussion about how the larger college formations or groupings in all four countries are balancing their higher-level specialisms alongside their commitment to providing for inclusion through lower-level provision and the promotion of progression pathways. This first scenario of limited policy learning does not presume any further radical shift in the English system, but simply involves building on the dialogue about existing TVET reforms and the identification of relatively common processes taking place in the area of FE and skills.

The second scenario is of a *more expansive policy learning*³ that takes place around the ‘sector’ to ‘system’ shift speculated upon in the previous section. If this were to occur in any substantive way then the UK Laboratory would be fully operational in terms of system-wide learning. But that particular condition of the laboratory would be dependent on a series of policy and contextual circumstances, some of which exist and others of which have not yet been conceptualized or realised (see Hodgson et al. in this special issue for a more detailed discussion).

Finally, there is the wild card of Brexit. Perhaps the political environment is now sufficiently unpredictable to encourage political actors to look beyond previous boundaries and assumptions in order to seek out new solutions. Whatever the outcome to the current political crisis around Brexit, it is hard to imagine that the UK economy will revert to an easy dependence on overseas labour. Therefore what the Brexit crisis may bring is a new and shared emphasis on UK-based skills development. In this sense, the UK Laboratory is open for business, the question will be the quality and extent of what is done within its confines.

³ The concept of ‘expansive policy learning’ and its evolving distinctions have, among other influences, drawn on Fuller and Unwin’s (2003, 2010) conceptual couplet of ‘Expansive/Restrictive’ which they have applied to apprenticeships and their workplace environments. Our use of the term expansive, therefore, has some affinities with but also differs from Fuller and Unwin, as we have acknowledged (see Hodgson and Spours 2017).

Notes on authors

Ann Hodgson is Professor of Post-Compulsory Education and Co-Director of the Centre for Post-14 Education and Work, UCL Institute of Education, London. She has experience of directing international, national and London-related projects and publishes on topics related to post-14 education policy across the UK; further education and skills, including organisation and governance; vocational education and training: curriculum and qualifications reform.

Ken Spours is Professor of Post-Compulsory Education and Co-Director of the Centre for Post-14 Education and Work at UCL Institute of Education, London. Ken specializes in post-14 curriculum and qualifications, organisation and governance and further education and skills.

References

- Association of Colleges (AoC). 2018. *College key facts 2017/18*. Accessed August 14, 2018.
https://www.aoc.co.uk/sites/default/files/Key%20Facts%202017-18_1.pdf
- Bailey, B. and L. Unwin. 2014. Continuity and Change in English Further Education: A Century of Voluntarism and Permissive Adaptability *British Journal of Educational Studies* 62 (4) 449–464.
- Boles, N. 2015. *Further Education Written Statement – HCWS152*. Accessed March 19, 2018. <http://www.parliament.uk/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2015-07-20/HCWS152>
- Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD). 2017. *Facing the future: tackling post-Brexit labour and skills shortages*. Accessed August 14, 2018.
https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/facing-the-future_2017-tackling-post-Brexit-labour-and-skills-shortages_tcm18-24417.pdf,
- Clarke, L and, C. Winch (eds). 2007 *Vocational education, international approaches, development and systems*. London: Routledge.
- Coffield, F., S. Edward, I. Finlay, A. Hodgson, K. Spours, and R. Steer. 2008. *Improving learning, skills and inclusion: the impact of policy on post-compulsory education*. London: Routledge.
- Department for Business Innovation and Skills/Department for Education (DBIS/DfE). 2016. *Post-16 Skills Plan*. Accessed August 14, 2018.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/536043/Post-16_Skills_Plan.pdf

DfE. 2018a. *Participation in education, training and employment by 16-18 year olds in England 2017*. Accessed August 14, 2018.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/718463/Main_text_participation_2018.pdf

DfE.2018b. *FE and Skills: March 2018*. Accessed August 14, 2018.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/693581/SFR23_2018_Further_Education_and_Skills_SFR_main_text.pdf

Fletcher, M., J. Gravatt, and D. Sherlock. 2015. "Levers of power: funding, inspection and performance management." In *The coming of age for FE? Reflections on the past and future role of further education colleges in the UK*, edited by A. Hodgson,155-177, London: IOE Press.

Fletcher, M., N. Lucas, N. Crowther, and D. Taubman. 2015. "The further education workforce." In *The coming of age for FE? Reflections on the past and future role of further education colleges in the UK*, edited by A. Hodgson,89-111, London: IOE Press.

Fuller, A. and L. Unwin, 2003. Learning as Apprentices in the Contemporary UK workplace: creating and managing expansive and restrictive participation, *Journal of Education and Work*, 16 (4) 407-425.

Fuller, A. and L. Unwin, 2010. 'Knowledge Workers' as the New Apprentices: The Influence of Organisational Autonomy, Goals and Values on the Nurturing of Expertise, *Vocations and Learning*, 3 (3) 201-222.

Gannon, A. (2014) *Professionalism in further education*. Accessed October 2, 2018.

<https://set.et-foundation.co.uk/media/1263118/Professionalism-in-further-education.pdf>

Greany, T. and Higham, R. (2018) *Heirarchy, markets and networks*. London UCL IOE Press.

HM Government (HMG). 2015 *Reviewing Post-16 Education and Training Institutions*.

Accessed October 2, 2018.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/446516/BIS-15-433-reviewing-post-16-education-policy.pdf

HMG. 2017. *Industrial Strategy: building a Britain fit for the future*. Accessed August 14, 2018.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf,

HMG. 2018a. *Apprenticeship Levy*. Accessed August 14, 2018.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/pay-apprenticeship-levy#history>,

HMG. 2018b *Strengthened Local Enterprise Partnerships*. Accessed August 14, 2018.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/728058/Strengthened Local Enterprise Partnerships.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/728058/Strengthened_Local_Enterprise_Partnerships.pdf)

Hodgson, A. 2015. (ed) *The coming of age for FE? Reflections on the past and future role of further education colleges in the UK*. London: IOE Press.

Hodgson, A., and K. Spours. 2011. "Educating 14-19 year olds in England: a UK lens on possible futures." *London Review of Education* 9 (2): 259-270.

Hodgson, A., and K. Spours. 2012. "Three versions of 'localism': implications for upper secondary education and lifelong learning in the UK." *Journal of Education Policy* 39, (2): 193-210.

Hodgson, A. and K. Spours. 2013. *What is happening with 17+ participation, attainment and progression in London - Colleges in London*. " Accessed October 15, 2018.

<https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/node/27700>

- Hodgson, A., and K. Spours. 2014. "Heavy fog in the Channel: Continent cut off": The reform of upper secondary education from the perspective of English exceptionalism." *European Educational Research Journal* 13 (6): 683-698.
- Hodgson, A., and K. Spours. 2015. "The future for FE colleges in England: the case for a new Post-Incorporation model." In *The coming of age for FE? Reflections on the past and future role of further education colleges in the UK*, edited by A. Hodgson, 199-221, London: IOE Press.
- Hodgson, A., and K. Spours. 2016a. *The evolution of social ecosystem thinking: its relevance for education, economic development and localities* A stimulus paper for the Ecosystem Seminar, the Centre for Post-14 Education and Work, London: UCL Institute of Education.
- Hodgson, A., and K. Spours. 2016b. "Restrictive and expansive policy learning – challenges and strategies for knowledge exchange in upper secondary education across the four countries of the UK." *Journal of Education Policy* 31 (5): 511-525.
- Hodgson, A. and K. Spours, 2017. The concepts of 'expansive and restrictive' and 'restrictive and expansive' continua: a clarification in relation to a recent article in the Journal of Education Policy' *Journal of Education Policy*, 32 (2) 250-251.
- Hodgson, A., B. Bailey, B., and N. Lucas. 2015. "What is FE?" In *The coming of age for FE? Reflections on the past and future role of further education colleges in the UK*, edited by A. Hodgson, 1-23, London: IOE Press.
- Hodgson, A., K. Spours, and D. Smith. 2017. "Future apprenticeships in England: the role of mediation in the new model." *Journal of Education and Work* 30 (6): 653-668.

- Hodgson, A., D. Smith, K. Spours, and J. Jeanes. 2018a. *Building the conditions for effective and sustainable technical and vocational education in London*. ELVET final report, London: UCL Institute of Education.
- Hodgson, A., K. Spours, M. Waring, J. Gallacher, T. Irwin, and D. James. 2018b. *FE and skills across the four countries of the UK: opportunities for policy learning*. Accessed October 2, 2018. [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-centres/centres/centre-for-post14-education-and-work/projects/fe-skills-four-countries-uk/pdf/FE and Skills Across the Four Countries of the UK Final .pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-centres/centres/centre-for-post14-education-and-work/projects/fe-skills-four-countries-uk/pdf/FE_and_Skills_Across_the_Four_Countries_of_the_UK_Final_.pdf)
- House of Commons. 2018a. *Further education: Post-16 Area Reviews*. Accessed August 14, 2018. <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7357>
- House of Commons. 2018b. *Apprenticeship statistics for England*. Accessed August 14, 2018. <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06113>
- Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA). 2018. *Apprenticeship frameworks and standards: the main differences*. Accessed October 4, 2018. <https://apprenticeships.blog.gov.uk/2017/08/01/apprenticeship-frameworks-and-standards-the-main-differences/>
- Keep, E. 2005. "Reflections on the curious absence of employers, labour market incentives and labour market regulation in English 14–19 policy: first signs of a change of direction?." *Journal of Education Policy* 20 (5): 533–553.
- Keep, E. 2016. *The long-term implications of devolution and localism for FE in England*. Oxford: SKOPE.
- Keep, E. 2018. *Scripting the future – exploring potential strategic leadership responses to the marketization of English FE and vocational provision*. Accessed September 13, 2018. http://fetl.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/FETL_scriptingthefuture-web.pdf

Mayor of London. 2018. *Adult Education Budget*. Available at:

<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/business-and-economy/skills-and-training/adult-education-budget-aeb>

Newman, J. 2001. *Modernising governance: New Labour, policy and society*. London: Sage Publications.

Ofsted. 2017. *Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2016/17*. London: Ofsted.

Pearce, N. 2016. How the Left should respond to the steady march of nationalism *New Statesman*, 15 December. Accessed October 15, 2018.

<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2016/12/how-left-should-respond-steady-march-nationalism>

Pullen, C., and J. Clifton. 2016. *England's Apprenticeships: Assessing the new system*. Institute for Public Policy Research/JP Morgan Chase New Skills at Work Programme. London: IPPR.

Pye Tait Consulting. 2018. *Perceptions of Vocational and Technical Qualifications*. Accessed October 2, 2018.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/743401/Perceptions_Survey_2018_-_FINAL_-_26_September_2018.pdf

Sahlberg, P. 2007. *Secondary education in OECD countries: common challenges, differing solutions*. Turin: European Training Foundation.

Spours, K., and A. Hodgson. 2013. "Why IfL should promote 'triple professionalism'" *In Tuition*, Issue 13, Summer 2013, 16-18.

UCL. 2018. *Policy learning across the four countries of the UK: FE and skills in England*.

Report of Seminar 2. Accessed August 14, 2018. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments->

[centres/centres/centre-for-post14-education-and-work/projects/fe-skills-four-countries-uk/pdf/FE and Skills across UK BP2 Final 26-10-17.pdf](#)

UK Government. 2017. *Preparing for adult funding devolution*. Accessed October 2, 2018.

[https://www.gov.uk/government/news/preparing-for-adult-funding-devolution](#)