

Restrictive and expansive policy learning - challenges and strategies for knowledge exchange in upper secondary education across the four countries of the UK

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Abstract

This article examines the challenges and possibilities for UK policy learning in relation to upper secondary education (USE) across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (NI) within current national and global policy contexts. Drawing on a range of international literature, the article explores the concepts of 'restrictive' and 'expansive' policy learning and develops a framework of dimensions for examining what is taking place across the UK at a time of change for all four national USE systems. From an examination of recent national policy literatures and interviews with key policy actors within the 'UK laboratory', we found that the conditions for expansive policy learning had markedly deteriorated due to 'accelerating divergence' between the three smaller countries and a dominant England that has been pursuing an 'extreme Anglo Saxon education model'. The article also notes that some aspects of policy learning continue to take place 'beneath the radar' between UK-wide civil society organisations. This activity is more prevalent across the three smaller countries although each, to differing degrees, is still constrained by its position in relation to the UK as a whole.

Key words: policy learning, upper secondary education, United Kingdom, Anglo-Saxon education model

'...we can make things much easier for ourselves if we actively learn to live with the past, and with the way many of the important actions we take now may carry both consequences and requirements which stretch far into the future...we can recognize the reality of long linkages over time, and adapt our policies and institutions to allow for them, or we can blunder forwards without either rearview mirrors or forward vision much beyond the end of the ship's prow.' (Pollitt, 2008: 181)

Introduction

Global education performance measures, and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in particular, are increasingly focusing the minds of national policy-makers (Lingard and Grek, 2009). With what has been termed 'PISA shock' (Waldow, 2009) and a desperate desire for knowledge about how certain countries achieve 'success' in these global league tables, comes the temptation to indulge in 'policy borrowing'; an approach that 'searches the international experience for examples of a unique, transferable 'best practice'' (Raffe, 2011: 1).

We will suggest that policy-makers who adopt this logic of policy-making are living in what Pollitt (2000) refers to an 'expanded present', with very little understanding of the past or a sense of long-term vision. We will argue that this form of 'institutional amnesia' in education is now closely linked to the rise of a dominant Global Education Reform Model (GERM) (Sahlberg, 2007) in which transnational organisations such as the Organisation for Economic, Co-operation and Development (OECD) encourage elite policy communities to acknowledge the imperatives of competitive globalisation as the only existing order.

At the outset we contrast 'policy borrowing' by policy elites in this globalised expanded present with the possibilities of 'policy learning' that is rooted in a historical understanding of the conditions of one's own society. We will argue that genuine national historical understanding not only helps policy-making in any particular country, but can also contribute to international mutual learning that involves various communities coming together to share their own understandings of common global challenges (Raffe, 2011). In doing so we suggest that an understanding of challenges and possibilities for policy learning may be better

served by moving from a policy borrowing/policy learning distinction to a restrictive/expansive policy learning continuum.

Building on previous ECER contributions (Hodgson and Spours, 2012; 2013a; 2014), the article sets out to explore different approaches to policy learning in relation to upper secondary education (USE). USE systems are important for this kind of study because they have been the focus of international comparison and a desire to engage in policy borrowing from those systems deemed to be the most successful. USE also constitutes a complex policy-making and enactment process involving a wide range of stakeholders, because of the transitions at the end of the phase to further study, higher education and employment, all of whom can potentially contribute to the policy learning process.

The geopolitical focus for this research was the four countries of the UK - England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (NI). We consider the UK to be a particularly fruitful site, referred to as a possible 'natural laboratory' for policy learning (Raffe and Byrne, 2005) because of the processes of convergence and divergence that are taking place between these countries. On the one hand, they continue to share important contextual features, such as a flexible youth labour market, curriculum choice in USE and an internationalised higher education system, but, on the other, they are increasingly diverging in terms of policy as each nation introduces reforms designed to respond to global, national and local circumstances.

Methodology

This paper draws upon research undertaken for a number of studies: *The Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training* (2003-9) (Pring *et al.*, 2009); *The impact of policy on teaching learning and assessment in the learning and skills system* (2003-7) (Coffield *et al.*, 2008); *New directions in learning and skills in England, Scotland and Wales: recent policy and future possibilities* (2008-10) (Hodgson *et al.*, 2011a); and local/regional studies on 14-19 education and training in England (Hodgson and Spours, 2013a & b), together with recent national policy documents relating to USE.

The paper also makes use of policy/practitioner/researcher dialogues and discussions that formed part of a civil society education inquiry¹. Additional fieldwork involved 15 interviews with key stakeholders (e.g. national policy-makers, representatives of examinations awarding bodies, teacher unions and professional associations, local authorities and schools colleges and work-based learning partnerships) in all four countries in 2014. In each of the interviews we asked policy actors about recent USE developments in their respective systems; their views on policy learning and policy borrowing in the wider international and home international contexts; and the potential for the further development of policy learning. In order to gain agreement for the face-to-face interviews and to allow policy-makers to speak openly, we guaranteed anonymity. This was particularly important in the three smaller countries where the identification of individuals would be relatively easy.

The article thus addresses the following four questions:

1. What reforms are taking place across the USE systems in the four countries of the UK and how are these perceived by their respective policy actors?
2. What are the main international trends in USE and how are these perceived across the UK?
3. What forms of policy learning are taking place in these contexts?
4. How far does the UK constitute a laboratory for 'expansive policy learning' and what conditions would be required to facilitate its growth?

Globalisation and approaches to policy learning

The OECD, PISA and the global education reform model

The past 20 years or so have seen the emergence of transnational forms of governance. Most prominent of these has been the growing role of the OECD as a major global policy actor (Sellar and Lingard, 2013). The OECD, along with other transnational organisations such as the World Bank and the European Commission, have promoted a new type of education performativity with a focus on the

¹ See (<http://www.compassonline.org.uk/education-inquiry/>) and (<http://www.ioe.ac.uk/research/89673.html>).

comparative use of global data (Lawn, 2013), the effects of which have been the globalisation of national agendas and ideological discourses and the framing and reduction of a range of national education options (Taylor *et al.*, 1997).

At the centre of the globalisation of education reform lies PISA, a measure of the comparative performance of educational systems of member and other nations based on tests commissioned by the OECD. The central assumption of PISA is the importance of key competences - mathematics, literacy, science and problem solving - to improve national economic competitiveness amidst the imperatives of globalization (Sellar and Lingard, 2013). The power of PISA is rooted not only in the widespread acceptance of these assumptions by elite policy communities, but also through 'mediatisation' (Strombach, 2008): the ways in which PISA results and its underlying logic enter the consciousness of national policy-makers and wider publics through various media.

The growing role of the OECD and PISA has reinforced what Sahlberg (2007, 2011, 2015) refers to as the global education reform model (GERM). This dominant model, according to Sahlberg, is based on five features - the 'standardization' of education to focus on outcomes and testing with an attempt to lower costs; the elevation of core subjects such as literacy and numeracy that are more suited for measurement by global assessment surveys such as PISA; a search for low risk ways of reaching learning goals; corporate management models which will include the concept of competition and privatization; and test-based accountability and inspection systems closely tied to the surveillance of teachers. Sahlberg (2015) maintains that GERM is in essence an Anglo Saxon model, emanating from England's *Education Reform Act* (1988)² and the US's *No Child Left Behind* policy (2001)³, that has been promoted and developed over the past 25 years and is now also permeating transitional economies.

The GERM has been countered by the Nordic, or more precisely, the Finnish model

² See <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/contents>

³ See <http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>

of education. In 'Finnish Lessons' (2011, 2015), Sahlberg argues that Finland's high performance in PISA is based not on GERM, but on a number of other system factors - a focus on equity; a high status education profession and high trust relationships; devolved responsibilities within broad national frameworks and an emphasis on links between education, social services and localities to support school improvement. Even though Finland has dropped down the PISA table in the 2012 tests, it has decided not to follow the GERM logic (e.g. more time for mathematics) and, instead, has resolved to introduce more inter-disciplinary work and integrated problem-solving into classrooms (Strauss, 2015). It has been possible in the past to talk more generally about a Nordic model of education (e.g. Telhaug *et al.*, 2006), but less so these days because education in some Scandinavian countries has been pressurized by the Anglo Saxon model. Sweden, for example, has been subjected to significant marketization (Lundahl *et al.*, 2013).

There is a third global approach – the East Asian/Pacific model – based on a long-hours working culture, high family expectations, social conformity and didactic pedagogy (Sahlberg, 2011). International attention regarding this model is currently focused on Shanghai due to its top-of-the-table spot in the 2012 PISA results, not least by UK Westminster politicians engaging in policy borrowing around mathematics teaching (Howse, 2014).

These different global models are highly relevant to our discussion of policy learning because they featured in interviews with policy-makers across the UK as significant reference points in policy formulation as the national systems diverged.

Concepts of policy borrowing and policy learning

Steiner-Khamsi (2012) notes that interest in policy borrowing and the transnational flow of ideas has been a major pre-occupation of those involved in comparative education for some time and that researchers from the field of policy studies have entered the debate more recently with theories around the policy process that have enriched the terrain.

Phillips and Ochs (2010) provide a useful analytical framework to explain both the process of policy borrowing and the reasons why and how a particular country might wish to engage in this process. The framework comprises four stages – cross-national attraction, decision, implementation and internalisation/indigenisation – and suggests that there are six potential foci of attraction – guiding philosophy/ideology; ambitions/goals; strategies; enabling structures; processes; and techniques. This framework suggests that policy borrowing, and we will argue also policy learning, involves an examination of a number of related dimensions of policy-making and its enactment.

By the term ‘policy learning’ in the context of education we are referring to processes that focus on modes of governance, curriculum, implementation and the conduct of policy itself across national boundaries; across time and involving different policy actors. These different dimensions emerge from studies on policy learning in the late 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Bennett and Howlett, 1992; May, 1992). More recently the term ‘policy learning’ has been used to refer to the capacity of policy-makers to use historical and international evidence to better understand their own national systems; to identify 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). Policy learning defined in this way is 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).

We review this policy borrowing/policy learning distinction through the work of Lange and Alexiadou (2010) who suggest that what is referred to as ‘policy borrowing’ could, in fact, be viewed as a particular style of policy learning. Reflecting on policy processes in open methods of co-ordination across the EU, they identify four overlapping policy styles - ‘mutual learning’ for ‘cognitive gain’ through shared problem-solving; ‘competitive learning’ to gain advantage through processes

of policy borrowing; ‘imperialistic learning’ with an emphasis on imposing/exporting policies and ideas onto other states and, finally, ‘surface learning’ reflecting various national attempts to resist EU influence in education (focused very much on the UK).

Drawing on the work of Raffe and Spours, 2007; Lange and Alexiadrou, 2010; Philipps and Ochs, 2011; and Raffe, 2011; we have created a theoretical framework along a ‘restrictive-expansive continuum’. In Fuller and Unwin’s work (2008) this type of continuum has been used to analyse the experience of apprenticeships in relation to company policy and practice. Here we apply this concept to situate different types of policy learning in relation to national and global ideological and governance environments.

(Figure 1 about here)

Restrictive and expansive policy learning in a globalised era – reflections on the dimensions in Figure 1

Policy motivation and political and governance environments

Approaches to policy learning take place within wider political and policy environments. Here we argue that the ability to learn is based on a range of factors - overall political motivation and learning desire; the range of policy actors involved; the governance structures and the nature of the policy-making process itself. As we suggest in Dimensions 1 and 2 in Figure 1, if the prime motivation is to improve education systems for competitive economic and political gain involving a relatively small number of national politicians, then this is likely to lead to restrictive learning. Raffe and Spours (2007) refer to this form of learning as ‘politically generic’, in which the focus is primarily on the effective exercise of power rather than on improving policy and its enactment. Counter-posed to this is a more expansive approach to the use of international comparisons in which the dominant motivation is collaboration to improve one’s own system through mutual understanding and shared knowledge. Crucial to this approach is the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders who may

not be subject to the same political pressures and timeframes as politicians and thus are likely to have broader learning motives. Arguably, the dominant global education reform model, and the ways in which it is assessed and mediated, suggests a gravitation towards more restrictive and competitive forms of learning.

Modes of learning

We suggest that there is a strong relationship between historical and international comparative learning – dimensions three and four in Figure 1. At its simplest, a focus on international borrowing (in the expanded present) can crowd out historical reflection because it is a form of learning that is most politically visible to publics (e.g. we are learning from the best) and most easily controlled by political elites through, for example, the use of consultants or political advisers or a sympathetic media. Historical reflection, the use of policy memory and the avoidance of ‘amnesia’ (Pollitt, 2008; Highams and Yeomans, 2007), on the other hand, requires a demanding set of conditions. These we would argue include greater continuity and less turbulence in the policy-making communities; greater involvement of stakeholders who hold policy memory; and continuity of policy itself with built-in space for evaluation and reflection.

We will see that across the four countries of the UK the dimensions of policy learning detailed in Figure 1 were reflected in differing combinations of policy behaviours depending on the particular national context within the four education systems.

Developments in USE across the four countries of the UK

From ‘constrained’ to ‘accelerating’ divergence

It is often assumed that the UK can be seen as a single entity in terms of its USE system and many cross-national studies use the UK as the unit of analysis. There are undoubtedly macro-level features that apply to the UK education and training system as a whole. All four countries – England, Scotland, Wales and NI - broadly share the same economy (although there are increasing national differences) and

there is still considerable UK-wide interchange in relation to higher education and employment. In terms of USE, there is the dominance of academic study, the importance of choice of specialist subjects rather than a compulsory curriculum, a relatively small number of subjects studied after the age of 16 (although Scotland is somewhat of an exception here) and a limited role for apprenticeships and the work-based route. In this sense, there are still considerable similarities between the four countries when looked at from afar (Hodgson *et al.*, 2011b).

Over the past 20 years, however, growing differences between the systems of the four countries have emerged that are historically based (particularly in the case of Scotland) but also pertain to the effects of democratic devolution since 1999 in Scotland and Wales and since 2007 in NI. During the period of New Labour (1997-2010) the balance between the forces of convergence and divergence was characterised as 'constrained divergence' (Raffe and Byrne, 2005). This balance was based on relatively similar aims for education and limited autonomy for Scotland, Wales and NI from Westminster offset by increasing differences of policy emphasis and education governance arrangements (Hodgson *et al.*, 2004). Constrained divergence, however, had in-built instabilities – the main one being the asymmetry between England and the other countries. England is by far the largest with a population of 54 millions. Scotland has about five millions, Wales three millions and NI just under two millions. These last three could, in this sense, be compared to small states or a large city region. Size is also associated with political power with a dominant UK Westminster Parliament reflecting English politics. Any shift in the English context has a disproportionate effect on the rest of the UK and that is precisely what happened in the 2010 and 2015 General Elections in relation to education policy.

Between 2010-15 under a Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, constrained divergence gave way to 'accelerating divergence' due to the impact of a range of polarising factors. These included radical changes the Coalition government made to the assessment and structure of the key USE qualifications, the General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) for 14-16 year olds and the General

Certificates of Education Advanced Level (A Levels) for 16-19 year olds, that affect not only England, but also Wales and NI because they continue to share these qualifications. This increased the rate of divergence between the four countries that over previous years had been creating different sets of curriculum, qualifications, institutional, governance and quality assurance arrangements, albeit in a managed way.

In the light of this in 2014 we examined national policy documents and the perceptions of policy-actors in the four countries of the UK regarding the trajectories of USE policy and lines of convergence and divergence.

The next section of the article provides a brief description of some of the areas where these countries are moving apart in terms of the education of 14-19 year olds (the age group involved in USE in the UK system) and the reasons that lie behind these differences. While earlier studies have considered this topic, there has often been a bi-lateral focus (England/Scotland; England/Wales) rather than a consideration of changes in all four countries of the UK. NI has tended to remain relatively neglected as a site of study. Most importantly, there has been nothing that fully considers the substantial changes that took place under the UK Westminster Coalition Government (2010-15) that have had an impact primarily on English USE but also, as we shall see, in a reactive sense, on Scotland, Wales and NI. In each of the four national cases we comment on the style of policy-making and policy learning in relation to the restrictive/expansive policy learning framework, with a particular focus on UK-wide relationships.

England – ‘Big Brother’ swerves towards an extreme Anglo Saxon model

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 USE qualifications for Wales and NI and for the small number of schools in Scotland that wish to offer them. In several interviews in the smaller countries of the UK, England was referred to as ‘Big Brother’. It contains Westminster, the UK-wide Parliament, and has been used as the test-bed for Westminster Government

education reforms of USE. Within the UK context, therefore, the English USE and higher education systems exert a powerful influence.

After the General Election of 2010, policy on USE swerved towards what has been termed 'an extreme Anglo Saxon model' (Hodgson and Spours, 2014). This comprised changes to the national curriculum in England that have taken it in a more traditional direction both in terms of content and pedagogy and a focus on what has been termed 'the English Baccalaureate' for 14-16 year olds that places greater emphasis on the acquisition of so called 'facilitating' academic subjects (English, Mathematics, History/Geography, Science, Languages). This traditional curriculum approach is also reflected in significant changes to the two main national USE examinations – GCSE, normally taken in around ten subjects at the age of 16, A Levels, three or four of which are normally taken at the age of 18/19 and full-time broad vocational qualifications, such as BTEC (Business, Technology Education Council) awards, taken by a sizeable minority of 16-19 year olds. The reforms that will be introduced from September 2015 will result in less practical learning, more reliance on terminal examinations, with a reduction in the use of coursework in all qualifications and the reintroduction of linear A Levels. These changes reverse much of the previous Government's curriculum and qualifications reforms. England has also seen an increased support for autonomous schools, new forms of institutions competing for the delivery of USE and a much-reduced role for local authorities. As we will see, these two sets of reforms – curriculum and qualifications and institutional arrangements – in particular increased the rate of divergence between England and the other countries of the UK.

With regards to policy-making and policy learning, interviews with three leading national officials in governmental and regulatory organisations suggested that English policy-makers had accepted divergence as a logical development of devolution and that this had negatively affected attitudes to policy learning across the UK. Scotland had always been different in their view, but it was the relationships with Wales and NI that were more telling. One interviewee talked about the breakdown in dialogue with Welsh policy-makers when these had asked for a

reappraisal of the grade boundaries in GCSE that had resulted from the UK Westminster reforms. This request, it was thought, signalled an end to the attempt to preserve common standards across the countries of the UK in relation to what continued to be shared qualifications. Relations with NI, on the other hand, remained more congenial because it appeared that policy-makers there felt a greater need to balance freedom of action and comparability of qualifications across the UK. Amidst divergence of policy, a distinction was made between curriculum dialogue, which was becoming non-existent, and regulatory discussions on, for example, vocational qualifications. UK discussions on the latter were being maintained 'underneath the bonnet' as regulatory authorities in all four countries continued consideration of technical assessment and design issues. But even here there were differences of opinion as the regulatory authorities in Wales and NI would not accept that England had a leading role in this area.

In this increasingly divergent UK world, English inclinations in relation to policy learning had shifted. One policy-maker maintained that England had little to learn from the other UK countries because it was relatively high performing in relation to them and it had its own distinct reform agenda, which differed from theirs. This reflected a wider perception that the UK Coalition Government under Secretary of State, Michael Gove, saw itself bringing about an education 'revolution' and was not to be deflected from the course it had set right at the outset of its term of office (Nelson, 2013). Any 'learning' would, therefore, have to support this revolution. Ministerial visits to Shanghai in relation to mathematics teaching (Howse, 2014), for example, suggest that there is an aim to bring aspects of high performing Asian system into the English Anglo-Saxon model.

The English approach to policy learning can thus be seen as highly restrictive – focused on international competition; centralised around the role of the Secretary of State for Education; keen to use international comparison for 'cherry picking' best practice' and with an emphasis on radical change rather than learning from the past.

Scotland – a small but increasingly confident nation

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 end of USE 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).

The most recent curriculum reform, *Curriculum for Excellence (CFE)*⁴ 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. The Scottish system is viewed by policy-makers and practitioners alike as producing good general education outcomes, particularly for the more able, but these do not necessarily extend to all communities, particularly in urban areas. Scottish policy actors were at pains to stress that CfE, should be seen as a response to internal criticisms of the Scottish system – too academic and unequal. CfE aims, therefore, to promote a broad set of skills and has informed reforms to Scottish qualifications that contain both theoretical and practical learning within a unified national qualifications framework. CfE could also be viewed as a particular response to globalisation, with its emphasis on four key outcomes - ‘successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors’. These are reflected in the policy slogan ‘raise the bar and close the gap’.

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

⁴ Curriculum for Excellence
(<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/>)

policy terms. It also has its own unified national credit and qualifications framework that it successfully promotes globally (Howieson and Raffe, 2013).

Despite a strongly distinctive national position, Scottish politicians were not immune from the effects of PISA. In 2012, a video was made by the Scottish Government, in which it promoted the cause of 15 year olds competing for Scotland and its economic and political future by taking PISA tests (Lingard and Sellar, 2014).

Nevertheless, the official position was that PISA was in the background, with one policy-maker asking rhetorically, '*What does PISA measure that we want to achieve as a nation?*'

Scottish attitudes towards policy learning have been affected by a range of factors. One interviewee remarked that mythology about the strengths of the Scottish system plays a huge role. This is based on its historical determination to offer free education and the preservation of the local comprehensive school funded and steered by the local authority, both of which mark it out from England. Beyond this, attitudes towards policy learning across the UK were informed by a growing antipathy to the English system and its role in UK politics, with reforms being rejected on political – 'not the Scottish way' - rather than educational grounds. Moreover, Scotland views itself as having a distinct and relatively high performing education system which, according to one interviewee, means that there is little inclination to learn from the smaller countries of the UK.

Despite the internal reflections and even academic disagreement around CfE (e.g. Priestley and Humes, 2010), there is a view that Scottish policy-making remains somewhat complacent. Raffe (2008) asked 'what is stopping Scottish Education from learning about itself?' He concluded that it was a mixture of 'seeking consensus' and not promoting controversy and the lack of adequate national structures through which a broader form of policy learning might take place. In addition, interviewees suggested that Scotland's approach is being affected now by the wider political process. On more than one occasion, they referred to the more closed attitudes of Scottish National Party (SNP) officials that had recently

centralised policy control, a process that may well be continuing following the Referendum on Independence and the General Election result in 2015 that saw the SNP sweep the board in Scotland.

In this global, UK and national political landscape Scottish inclinations towards learning from international experiences reach far beyond the UK. They appear to be looking in two quite different directions. First, they incline towards successful Nordic systems, particularly in terms of teaching and learning that might inform CfE. Second, they look to Anglophone countries such as New Zealand and Australia that have adopted similar vocational education and training systems to Scotland. At the same time, dialogue continues with policy-makers in Wales and NI and there are quite significant ties between the Scottish teacher union (EIS) and other teacher unions and associations across the UK, although in both cases it is hard to judge the extent of exchange. Overall, there was a view that there were no UK models to copy, and that any policy learning could take place from a position of confidence.

The Scottish approach to policy learning shows features of both restrictive and expansive dimensions, but with a tendency towards the latter. It affords a degree of stakeholder participation in the policy process (although there are some centralising tendencies) and has a keen sense of its own history and the national reasons for further reform. Furthermore, it is open to dialogue with a range of countries that reflect different global education models, but to the exclusion of England.

Wales – seeking autonomy but with a crisis of confidence

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 work⁵. These have used English qualifications (GCSEs, A Levels and vocational awards), but Wales has not always gone along with Westminster

⁵ For the Welsh Baccalaureate see (<http://www.welshbaccalaureate.org.uk/Welsh-Baccalaureate-Home-Page/About-the-Welsh-Bac>)

Government policy. It did not introduce the 14-19 Diplomas (a major initiative of the previous Labour Government – see Hodgson and Spours, 2007) and is refusing to implement the Coalition 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. Like in Scotland, Welsh policy-making has, since democratic devolution, involved considerable efforts to consult with all stakeholders, including learners and to make extensive use of independent commissions and research evidence. In addition Wales is seeking to establish an independent regulator and awarding body (Qualifications Wales), modelled on Scotland’s SQA. There are, nevertheless, concerns among policy actors in Wales about the acceptability to higher education admission tutors of the Welsh versions of A Levels. These reservations have not fundamentally altered Welsh policy attitudes to the reforms proposed by the Westminster Coalition Government, however, and have led to a marked breakdown in political relations between Wales and England.

Unlike in Scotland our interviewees in Wales suggested that PISA has had a significant effect in that country. Welsh policy-makers have found themselves under considerable pressure due to the relatively poor performance of Wales compared with the other countries of the UK (Rees and Taylor, 2015; Evans, 2015). This has led to a rapid set of adjustments to the curriculum for 14-16 year olds with the development of a double mathematics GCSE and less credit being given to vocational qualifications, a trajectory of mild convergence with the Westminster Coalition reform agenda. The ability to diverge further from England may also be inhibited by the reductions in levels of funding as a result of Westminster’s economic austerity programme. Wales continues to suffer from high degrees of economic and social deprivation, derived in large part from the disappearance of mining and heavy industry in the 1970s and 1980s and, in various ways, this filters through to its education performance.

Furthermore, those interviewed suggested that Wales was going through a consolidation phase of policy because the emphasis was now on addressing under-performance rather than on the initial desire for a distinctive Welsh policy. While there were reports of continued dialogue with policy-makers in the other small countries of the UK, Welsh policy-makers appear to have suffered a crisis of confidence and have become absorbed with internal problems of performance in relation to PISA. Nevertheless, they are reviewing and improving the distinctive strand of the Welsh USE system, the Welsh Baccalaureate. But currently there is little room for substantive dialogue here because Wales is the only country within the UK that has a baccalaureate system.

In terms of restrictive and expansive policy learning the Welsh approach, like the Scottish, gravitates towards the expansive end of the continuum. However, while Wales enacts a more inclusive USE policy process and has a clear understanding of its national history, identity and trajectory, it is still highly dependent on UK-wide factors, such as higher education, and has become more inward-looking recently due to PISA pressure, so may be less open to international dialogue and debate.

Northern Ireland (NI) – surprising agreement emerges in a divided society

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 persistence of areas of poverty; a well-known selective and religiously divided secondary education system; and academic domination of the 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 Curriculum⁶ 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

⁶ See http://www.nicurriculum.org.uk/key_stage_4/entitlement_framework/

broader competences such as ‘learning for life and work’ (i.e. employability, personal development and local and global citizenship). Despite early opposition from some Unionist parties, according to interviewees there is now a broad consensus on this direction of development. 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.

NI has held to a trajectory that started in 2007 – the Revised National Curriculum focused on the core entitlement to areas of learning that are statutory up to 16. The last two years of this are reflected in the content of GCSEs, which have been redesigned with the Revised Curriculum in mind. NI has also recently undertaken a Review of GCSEs and A levels as part of a broader Qualifications Review because of changes proposed for England⁷.

In discussions with policy actors, relations around a ‘three-country approach’ to qualifications (England, Wales and NI) were seen to be ‘in a bit of a state’ in which ‘joint working’ had given way to ‘parallel working’. Policy actors insisted that NI does not want to go down the English path in terms of curriculum and qualifications and, instead, wants a clearly worked out alternative in the longer term. However, NI *de facto* finds itself constrained. The issue of comparability and portability of qualifications remains an important issue for access of NI learners to higher education across the UK. In this regard NI is treading a fine line between developing its own variants of GCSEs and A Levels while not straying too far from what is acceptable to UK universities.

There is a desire to seek educational not political solutions, to take things slowly to overcome instability and to seek the middle ground. In terms of policy learning, the policy-makers we interviewed pointed out that NI remains an educationally conservative society, which has an in-built leaning towards selective schooling from

⁷ See <http://www.deni.gov.uk/fundamental-review-of-gcse-and-a-levels>

11 years old, despite a long-standing debate about the effects of this approach to education (Gallagher and Smith, 2000). While NI was interested in knowledge exchange across what interviewees referred to as the 'Celtic Fringe' (Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland), there was a feeling that it is still too internally absorbed to engage in any serious UK-wide policy learning.

In terms of policy-making and policy learning Northern Ireland constitutes a unique case because of its size, its historical internal divisions and its relatively recent and still fragile devolution agreement. It has aspirations to take a more expansive approach to policy learning - involving of a range of stakeholders; a vision of a USE system that meets the historical, economic and political needs of NI and a willingness to learn from multiple international contexts. Nevertheless, currently it remains highly constrained because of its dependence on English qualifications and English universities and the need to slowly build internal consensus.

Policy relations and the challenges for expansive policy learning

Key dimensions of UK-wide relationships in 2014

From the interviews, background policy documents and existing research on USE systems in England, Scotland, Wales and NI, we identify three important trends currently shaping the relationships between these four UK nations.

Accelerating divergence and a 'slow-motion divorce'

According to some people we interviewed England, Wales and NI had historically had a good relationship, insofar as they shared qualifications and could broadly agree on their reform. But this is not the case now. In fact one interviewee talked about a 'slow-motion divorce' in which two countries - Wales and Northern Ireland - continue to diverge from England, albeit in different ways and at different speeds. At the core lie 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 affects England - Scotland relations in particular.

Smaller systems and limits to autonomy

However, these three countries are in different situations with regards to constraining influences. Scotland is able to follow its own course because of its long history of education independence; the evolution of its own 'education state'; and relatively good system performance. It regards itself as an educated country with education 'products' to sell around the world. Moreover, there has also been a high degree of consensus regarding the general direction of challenge in relation to CfE, although there are disagreements about aspects of implementation. Wales on the other hand, while striking a distinctive path since 1999, particularly through the development of the Welsh Baccalaureate, 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. However, such has been the negative reaction to the Coalition Government reforms by the curriculum and qualifications regulatory authorities, and to a lesser extent, by the education department in NI, that it is now beginning to take a more independent line in this area.

Differing responses to globalisation and to PISA

At the heart of the current wave of divergence are different responses to globalisation by Scotland, Wales and NI, when compared with the English trajectory since 2010. We found that the rejection of the Coalition government's education 'revolution' (Wilby, 2011) and its implications for USE were emphatic in all three national cases. We were particularly struck by the NI response given its strong historical ties to England. Put simply, Scotland, Wales and now NI wish to develop a broader, more skills-based and more practical curriculum than England with their own USE qualifications in order to address the needs of the modern world and to close class gaps. They have also eschewed the English market-led approach to institutional arrangements and governance, preferring collaboration between education providers and continuing to support the role of local authorities.

These UK-wide factors appeared to be far more powerful than the role of PISA. While there are separate OECD country reports, it is the international league tables based on tests of a cohort of 15 year olds that allow for intra-UK comparison, which have stoked political controversy. But only Wales felt compelled to respond actively and to reform its USE system, not only because of the negative media coverage resulting from its position at the bottom of the ‘home international league’, but also due to political pressure applied by the UK Conservative-led Coalition Government to a Labour-led Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) (BBC News, 2013). Apart from this we have to conclude, therefore, that there was not much evidence of ‘PISA shock’ across the four countries.

Has everyone left the UK policy learning laboratory?

While we found a desire amongst all the policy actors interviewed to engage in UK forms of policy learning, the wider factors outlined earlier meant that commitment to this did not run deep. They were not particularly wedded to policy borrowing; understanding policy learning as a process of mutual reflection on each other’s systems, practices and innovations, not simply as a search for examples of ‘best practice to copy. But the circumstances in which they found themselves in relation to the dimensions outlined in Figure 1 – policy motivation; governance structures and forms of exchange; international comparison and system selection and historical understanding – produced a complex picture in relation to UK-wide policy learning.

Fragmented motivations to learn

The central theme running through the interviews with Scotland, Wales and NI was their relationship with England as the dominant country and concern about the policy course it had pursued since 2010. Seen as ideologically driven and out of line with the other countries, there was little desire to follow England’s path, with several admissions that the general climate of dialogue had visibly worsened. But beyond this, the policy priorities of the three smaller countries were quite distinct as they were reflecting on their own respective internal development (Scotland); maintaining a balance between building a distinctive system and having to respond to PISA (Wales) and contemplating an unscripted divergence from England (NI).

England's motivations, on the other hand, remained highly political and ideological with a Conservative-led administration that was quite happy to see divergence in education policies in countries that they considered did not really matter.

The breakdown in forms of sharing and exchange

Following the fragmentation of common motivations came ruptures in official communication and agreement. By far the most significant development was the breakdown in dialogue between England and the three smaller nations that had existed to some extent under the Labour Government from 1997-2010. In terms of curriculum, the three nations have less in common with England than they previously had and England no longer has a curriculum agency, only a qualifications regulator in the form of Ofqual. Furthermore, in England policy-making has become even more centralised within the education ministry and resistant to external dialogue.

But not all lines of communication between the four countries of the UK had been severed. Education unions and civil society organisations, including employers, education researchers and higher education institutions were more open to policy dialogue and learning than their national government counterparts. Several of these have UK-wide forums where this kind of activity can take place. The Association of College and School Leaders (ASCL), for example, has a UK membership and an annual conference, as do education researchers with the British Educational Research Association (BERA). Local authorities have the UK-wide Local Government Association (LGA). Higher education institutions have cross-national organisations, such as Universities UK (UUK), and education, skills and employment issues across the UK lie at the heart of the work of the UK Commission on Education and Skills (UKCES). However, all of these civil society organisations have found themselves at the margins of the policy process in England.

Differing locations in relation to international learning

England, as we have seen, did not see any of the three other UK nations as useful in terms of policy borrowing or learning and was looking much further afield to, for

example, Shanghai. There was, however, some evidence that the three relatively small systems (and possibly with the additional inclusion of the Republic of Ireland, another small country) recognise that they face similar issues related to their size, such as the lack of policy-making capacity and issues of rurality, and could be seen to constitute a 'Celtic fringe' in terms of policy learning. But beyond this, national differences and differing relationships to PISA performance measures (system confidence) meant that this sense of commonality was not very strong. Moreover, increasing tensions with England and an awareness of broader international global debates appear to be averting their gaze from the possibilities of learning in the 'UK laboratory' to a wider exploration of Nordic systems.

Instances of historical reflection

Policy learning based on historical reflection varied across the four countries of the UK. In England it did not exist in policy circles due to the rapid change of ministers each with their own policy priorities. In Scotland and Wales there was some evidence of it. Scotland has a long-standing policy strand on its 'senior phase' (USE) going back to the 1980s and CfE was being built in relation to this reform's perceived strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, the Welsh Baccaulaureate has a 10-year history and its review has involved some historical reflection, albeit shorter than in Scotland. NI, on the other hand, has a 'modern history' stretching back to democratic devolution and power sharing in 2007. There was, however, one common theme of reflection across the three small nations and that was the continuing impact of inequalities that had to be addressed in the current reform process.

What possibilities for expansive policy learning across the UK?

The hope that the UK might provide a laboratory for expansive policy learning in relation to USE does not appear to have much foundation at the political level in 2015. The movement from constrained to accelerated divergence has put paid to that. But this does not mean that all policy actors have abandoned the UK laboratory; but it is being used in a fragmented and restrictive way.

As we have seen from each of the national case studies, English national policy-makers had, to all intents and purposes, abandoned the UK-wide laboratory. National policy makers in the three smaller countries while demonstrating dimensions of expansive policy learning within their own respective systems were also not significantly committed to UK-wide exchange. The incentives and motivations for policy autonomy were proving stronger than a commitment to sharing and learning.

Nevertheless, we did find some evidence of expansive policy learning taking place 'beneath the official policy radar,' involving a range of civil society actors. The influence of these stakeholders will have to become more extensive and systematic, however, if they are to have any significant impact on the UK laboratory. The conditions for expansive policy learning will require greater awareness by national policy-makers from all four nations of the salience of common challenges that are both UK-wide and part of a wider global discourse. Such issues include the continued inequalities between outcomes for young people from different social groups, exacerbated by education systems that remain academically dominated; the subsequent challenges facing the profile and role of vocational education and the need for a larger, more effective work-based route; the importance of developing broad competences in all USE programmes; making clearer connections between all USE programmes and higher education; and a greater consideration of how USE systems produce citizens and workers for the 21st Century rather than a focus on economic winners and losers in a global race.

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Figure 1. Dimensions of restrictive and expansive policy learning in education

Dimension	Restrictive	Expansive
1. Policy motivation	Competitive – designed to improve one’s own system in relation to economic globalisation and national politics	Collaborative - designed to develop understanding to improve one’s own system and contribute to international knowledge base
2. Governance structures and forms of exchange	Centralised and exclusive to national policy-makers	Decentralised and partnership-based with mediating layers of discussion that involve a range of stakeholders including practitioners
3. International comparison and system selection	Borrowing of ‘best practice’ from ‘successful systems’ in order to compete within a dominant global education reform model	Identification of common issues and ‘good practice’ in comparable contexts to assist with discussion of national problems and policy options
4. Historical understanding	Culture of constant policy innovation, focus on the new within a climate of ‘policy amnesia’	Understanding of national system histories through the exercise of ‘policy memory’ and reflection