

# **Chapter 1. National education systems: the wider context**

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## **Rationale and aims of the book**

Much writing on education focuses on schools. This book explores what is happening beyond schooling and discusses what is often referred to in the international literature as lifelong learning (e.g. Tuijnman and Schuller, 1998). The importance of extending initial education and training for young people, as well as ensuring that adults have access to learning across the life course, has become increasingly recognized by national governments as they grapple with the challenges of globalisation, technological change and, more recently, a widespread recession. The way that lifelong learning is funded, organized and governed is a hotly debated topic internationally since these matters can have a profound influence on wider political objectives, such as increasing access to opportunities, greater equity and improving quality of life.

As the title suggests, this book looks at how post-compulsory education – education and training beyond the age of 16 but excluding higher education – is organized within the United Kingdom (UK), with a particular focus on England, Scotland and Wales. In several important respects, the UK continues to exist as a single economic and political entity. There is a UK government, a recognized UK economy and major policy areas such as defence, economic and foreign policy are decided at the UK level. Viewed internationally, the different peoples and countries of the UK –

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - can be seen to share important system, social and cultural features.

However, there are underlying national and regional differences and these are becoming more evident. They are to some extent historical. England has always been the dominant entity, with a population more than five times that of the other three countries combined. Scotland, though much smaller, has fostered its own national identity for centuries. Wales, on the other hand, at least in governance terms has been much more closely integrated with England although, over the past two decades, it too has developed a distinctive sense of national purpose (Morgan, 2002). Back in the 1980s, both countries were sufficiently different from England to resist much of the neo-liberal reform associated with Thatcherism and retained many of the features of the previous Keynesian era. These underlying differences were given further scope to influence developments following parliamentary devolution in 1999, when Scotland and Wales achieved their own elected parliament and assembly, respectively, with important though still limited powers. Northern Ireland is, however, a different case. Its population continues to be divided in its political and cultural orientation. One community (predominantly Protestant) still looks to the UK (or more precisely England) for its identity, while the other (predominantly Catholic) sees a future within a united Irish entity.

These commonalities and differences across the UK continue to be played out in wider politics and inform many areas of policy, including education and training. It was against this background that five seminars, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)<sup>i</sup> deliberated the organisation and direction of development of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning in England, Scotland and Wales. The seminar series, which took place between 2008 and 2009, did not discuss

issues from Northern Ireland directly, although this book includes some reference to relevant developments there.

The seminar series provided the stimulus for this volume. However, its authors go well beyond the discussions that took place and also reflect on the changes that have occurred during the first few months after the election of a new UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in May 2010. Contributions to the book chart changes in the organisation and governance of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning in England, Scotland and Wales since 1997, with a particular focus on the period from 2007 onwards.

Throughout the text we use the term 'governance' alongside the narrower term 'government'. By governance we mean the broad political and organisational arrangements at national, regional and local levels, including the roles of policy formation, policy mechanisms and those involved in the policy-making process. While this term is contested and interpreted in different ways in the literature (e.g. Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Kooiman, 2003; Newman, 2005), we find it useful because it connotes a wider set of relationships than the term 'government', crossing public and private boundaries as well as embracing both the state and civil society (Ball, 2008). The term governance allows for an exploration of the different levels and configurations of power in complex political and organisational formations. It also prompts a focus on how policy is interpreted, translated, mediated and enacted at different levels of the system and how this impacts on sites of learning and the professionals and learners within them.

At the outset, due to the historical and policy differences described earlier, seminar participants grappled with a range of terminology to describe the same area of education. In England, for example, post-compulsory education and lifelong learning,

which was used in policy discourse from 1998 to 2001, has more recently been referred to as 'learning and skills' or even the 'further education (FE) system'. In Scotland and Wales, however, the term 'lifelong learning' has continued in use. Later in the chapter, the reasons behind the different uses of terminology are investigated further. Throughout the book we will use the term post-compulsory education and lifelong learning to describe all publicly funded provision from 16+ outside higher education institutions. However, in the cases of England and Wales we will also include discussion of the education of 14-19 year olds since this has been a major policy focus in the two countries and, to a lesser extent, in Northern Ireland, and is seen as an important aspect of initial post-compulsory education. We do not comment in detail on higher education because this is a huge area in its own right and would make the scope of the book too broad. Nevertheless, we do refer to the effects of the higher education system on post-compulsory education and lifelong learning, in particular the relationship between further and higher education via Foundation Degrees and Higher National Diplomas, because of the way in which it impacts on the provision of lifelong learning, most notably in Scotland.

During the seminar series, the various aspects of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning, and particularly policy developments, were always viewed within their wider economic, political, social and cultural contexts. This helped participants understand prevailing trends as well as the potential for and limitations on further change. Of specific interest were the ways in which the 'education state' (Hodgson and Spours, 2006) has been developing within the three countries, the different modes of governance and versions of democracy and the role of national agencies and their relationship with education providers. As the seminar series developed, there was an increasing focus on how different approaches to policy and organisational developments affected learners and their learning.

The seminar series concluded by considering future trajectories and scenarios for post-compulsory education and lifelong learning in England, Scotland and Wales. Participants discussed whether processes of national divergence in governance, a strong trend over the past decade, would continue and if so, in what form and with what effects. Could it be that the post-compulsory education and lifelong learning systems in each of the three countries would look radically different in 10 years time, with each of them locked into a particular 'path of dependency'? At the same time, other wider socio-economic developments, including the global economic crisis, suggested there could be pressures towards further convergence in some respects. Was it possible that amidst the contrasts in education policy and governance, fundamental economic problems might reassert a UK paradigm? Differences and commonalities could be viewed in yet another way. Could the variations between countries, for example in terms of socio-economic deprivation and affluence and between rural and urban localities, outweigh those between countries, so that educational experience is not so much determined by which country you live in, but where you live within that country? This discussion raises questions about the roles of the various levels of governance – national, regional, local and institutional – in determining education policy and outcomes.

An issue that recurred throughout the series, but entered the debate strongly in the final seminar, was whether the closer you got to the learner and the learning experience, the less difference there appeared to be between the three countries, especially if compared internationally. Was it the case that national differences that seemed so apparent at the 'meso' structural and governance levels were not strongly reproduced at the 'macro' UK and the 'micro' learner levels? The seminars explored an apparent paradox. On the one hand, classrooms look rather similar in England, Wales and Scotland, full-time learners study similar subjects and programmes in schools and colleges, the curriculum is overwhelmingly conducted in English and

apprenticeships follow similar patterns in all three countries. On the other, and when looked at through the lenses of access, equity and quality, differences began to appear. Policy and funding priorities affect which learners are able to access publicly funded education and training, what financial contribution they have to make and the quality of the environment in which they study. These tensions of commonality and difference are explored throughout the book.

The seminar series and the book bring together perspectives from researchers, policy-makers and practitioners involved in post-compulsory education and lifelong learning systems in England, Wales and Scotland. The seminars facilitated a process of shared knowledge production and mutual learning. The series as a whole produced a rich, up-to-date and highly textured source of evidence in an under-researched area. Economists, political and social scientists and education specialists debated issues with policy-makers from national and local government in all three countries and practitioners from a range of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning providers. All participants were committed to developing new understandings of a complex and fast-changing picture to inform future research, policy-making and practice in an area which was recognized as being fundamental to the economic and social well-being of the three nations involved.

### **Key features of the systems in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland**

It is useful to look at commonalities and differences between the four countries of the UK through the lens of wider international comparison. Continental European initial

post-secondary education and training systems can be categorized in a number of ways (see for example Green *et al.*, 1999; CEDEFOP, 2009).

Firstly, there is a distinction to be made between those systems that are more education based (e.g. the UK where most young people remain in full-time education in schools and colleges until the age of 18 or 19) and those where a significant proportion of young people will be undertaking learning in the workplace through apprenticeships (e.g. Germany or Switzerland). Secondly, there are education and training systems which are highly centralized (e.g. France where the curriculum and schools are under the direct control of national ministries) and those which are more devolved with increasing levels of responsibility handed to local authorities, schools and colleges (e.g. Finland and Sweden). Education and training systems can also be distinguished according to how far state functions have been privatised and the extent to which a market in institutional relations is encouraged to operate. In this respect, the UK system, more particularly England, can be viewed as highly market-driven compared with other European systems, and located much nearer to other Anglo-Saxon systems, such as the US and New Zealand. By way of contrast, education and training can be conceived and operated under social partnership agreements between the state, trade unions and employers. This is a feature, for example, of Nordic and Germanic systems.

Viewed through these different perspectives, the UK systems as a whole can be seen as predominantly education-based, with a relatively minor role for the workplace and social partnership. That is to say, the 'macro-feature' of the weak relationship between the education and training system and the labour market makes them quite distinct from the Nordic and Germanic models. On the other hand, each of the four countries of the UK differs in terms of the level of devolution and centralization and the degree to which the market dominates the language of

governance and the behaviour of its schools, colleges and work-based providers. Here, as we will see in later chapters, England stands out as having taken privatisation and a market-driven approach much further than Scotland and Wales since the mid-1980s (see also Ball, 2007). In terms of devolution of power, Scotland and Wales have retained a more powerful role for local authorities in the governance of schools and community education, while England, under both Conservative and New Labour Administrations, became more centralised, operating through a large number of ‘arms length’, non-Ministerial agencies (e.g. the Further Education Funding Council and the Learning and Skills Council), which appropriated many of the powers that had resided at the local level (Coffield *et al.*, 2008).

Subsequent chapters will detail the different governance and organisational arrangements in England, Scotland and Wales. Here we briefly summarise the key system features in each of the countries in order to provide the reader with a ‘map’ to navigate a way through later chapters (see Table 1.1).

**(TABLE 1.1 ABOUT HERE)**

In *England*, education policy is determined by two Ministries – the Department for Education (DfE), which has responsibility for education and training up to the age of 19, and the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), which oversees all forms of publicly funded education and training beyond the age of 19. This age-related Ministerial bifurcation has also affected the language of policy in England, with a loss of the term lifelong learning as an overarching narrative. In England the New Labour Government legislated to raise the age of participation to 18 by 2015 (the Coalition Government has not yet indicated its final view on this), whereas in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland compulsory education ends at the age of 16.

Governance of the system is highly complex and has also been subject to frequent changes of approach in recent years, which has added to the sense of complexity (Coffield *et al.*, 2008). In the latter part of the New Labour Administration (1997-2010), democratically elected local authorities were given overall strategic responsibility for the commissioning of education and training up to the age of 19, but in conjunction with a range of arms-length funding (e.g. the Young Peoples' Learning Agency) and regulatory bodies (e.g. Ofsted and Ofqual). Funding for the education and training of 19+ learners is under the Skills Funding Agency. Schools, colleges and work-based training providers have high degrees of autonomy and compete for learners, although 14-19 policy under the New Labour Government also emphasized the need for collaboration between providers (DfES, 2005). At the same time, government policy over the last two decades has encouraged the establishment of different types of providers (e.g. academies, trust schools and 'free schools') to join a wide array of specialist schools, colleges and independent learning providers. Qualifications are regulated by Ofqual which reports directly to Parliament, but they are developed and marketed by a range of private awarding bodies. Currently young people have a choice of four major routes from the age of 16 – General Certificate of Education Advanced Levels (A Levels) in a wide range of subjects; 14 Lines of 14-19 Diplomas at Foundation, Higher and Advanced Level; Apprenticeships; and Foundation Learning programmes at Entry and Level 1. Entry to these programmes is selective and depends on the learner's prior attainment in General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Level programmes, which may take a more academic or a more applied form. Many 14-16 year olds now take a mix of GCSEs and vocational programmes (including 14-19 Diplomas), although this will vary according to the provision available in their locality (Lynch *et al.*, 2010).

*Scotland* has a unified structure for post-compulsory education and lifelong learning with a single Cabinet Secretary responsible for both. Schools and community education providers are funded via 32 local authorities. Post-school education and training and higher education were funded directly by two dedicated funding councils from 1999–2005, but in 2005 the two bodies were merged to form the Scottish Further and Higher Funding Council. As in England, colleges are self-governing institutions, having been given incorporated status since 1993. Institutional arrangements in Scotland are much simpler than in England with the majority of young people studying in comprehensive schools up to the age of 17 and a minority moving into further education colleges for vocational programmes from the age of 16. Colleges in Scotland cater for a wide age range. Scotland has its own qualifications system and most school and college qualifications are developed and administered by a single awarding body, the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA). A comprehensive credit and qualifications framework – which claims to be the most developed in Europe – aims to include all qualifications in Scotland.

*Wales* has a single ministry – the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) – responsible for all aspects of education and training, although there is still some distinction in provision at the age of 19 because pre-19 learners have greater statutory entitlement than those post-19. A major change took place in 2006, when all the arms-length agencies with responsibilities in the education and training field, except the HE funding council, were absorbed into the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG). This means that WAG's responsibilities now run right through from policy development to delivery and implementation, including decisions on funding allocations to post-16 providers. Local authorities have an established

and distinctive role in relation to the funding and planning of school provision up to the age of 19. As in England, schools and colleges compete for 16-19 year olds, but there has been a much stronger drive towards collaboration (WAG, 2004 and 2006). While further education colleges are also incorporated institutions, the education provider market is less active in Wales, where there is some division of labour between schools, which primarily offer general education up to the age of 16 and in sixth forms, and colleges, which focus mainly on vocational courses and now also cater for the majority of post-16 students. Moreover, the push for institutional diversity so prevalent in England has not been pursued in Wales. Wales uses the same qualifications as England, but pursues its own regulatory agenda and has recently developed a distinctive overarching qualification in the Welsh Baccalaureate (see Chapter 4 for more detail on this award).

*Northern Ireland* - The Department of Education of Northern Ireland (DENI) is responsible for the central administration of all aspects of school-based education and related services, except the higher and further education sector, responsibility for which is within the remit of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). The creation of separate ministries was partly a result of the need to provide sufficient Ministerial portfolios to facilitate division of responsibilities across the range of political parties partaking in power-sharing. It had been planned that in January 2010 the five Education and Library Boards, the equivalent of local authorities in other parts of the UK, the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Regional Training Unit would merge into a new Education and Skills Authority (ESA). The intention was to bring both the policy and operational aspects of education and training within the remit of national government with an emphasis on raising standards, meeting targets and delivering efficiency

gains (ESANI Implementation Team, 2007). The formation of a large centralized agency reporting directly to the Department of Education has stalled due to political opposition from Unionist politicians. Meanwhile, further education colleges within Northern Ireland have been merged into six large regional organisations. The school system in Northern Ireland is still divided into 'maintained' (mainly Catholic) and 'controlled' (mainly Protestant) schools and, while the 11+ examination that determines secondary school entry has been officially abolished, both Catholic and state grammar schools are still effectively selecting pupils through their own admissions tests. In terms of qualifications, Northern Ireland still offers English-style awards - GCSE and A Levels, as well as a range of vocational qualifications. Northern Ireland has not introduced the 14-19 Diplomas, but does intend to implement an Entitlement Framework in September 2013. From that date, schools will be required to provide pupils with access to a minimum number of courses at Key Stage 4 (current target 24) and at post-16 (current target 27). In both cases at least one-third of the courses must be general (academic) and at least one-third applied (vocational/professional/technical).

### **Similarities and differences**

Education and training policy in England and Northern Ireland is overseen by two ministries, one largely responsible for schools and the other for post-school and adult education and training. In Wales and Scotland, on the other hand, responsibilities have been united under one ministry to reflect their stronger focus on 'cradle to grave' lifelong learning. The role of local authorities is more pronounced in Scotland and Wales, although the English system has been moving back in this direction more recently. Arms-length agencies perform financial and regulatory functions in England,

Northern Ireland and Scotland, with some formal separation between policy formulation and operation. Wales stands out in terms of its deliberate attempt to remove arms-length agencies, and its more unified curriculum and qualifications system, although this latter feature it shares with Scotland. Northern Ireland's distinctiveness lies in its historical community divisions, which the Northern Ireland Assembly is attempting to address through a process of centralization and mergers in terms of the governance of education and training. Scotland has the longest tradition of a distinctive education system separate from the English model and has developed its own particular national curriculum and qualifications approach, although its governance structures remain surprisingly similar to those in England. As later chapters in the book will indicate, the difference for Scotland lies more in the way that policy is formulated via professional dialogue, a feature that it shares to some degree with Wales. England remains distinctive because of its size, the complexity of its governance arrangements, its institutional diversity and the extent to which policy promotes an education market. In addition, England stands alone in passing legislation to raise the age of participation to 18 and this is likely to have an impact on the distribution of resources towards younger learners and away from adults. While Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all aspire to increase levels of participation in post-secondary education, their stance is one of encouragement rather than compulsion.

This structural overview of the ways in which the four countries of the UK organize their education and training system tells only a part of the story. There is another less obvious narrative about how the systems work in practice, who is involved in the formation and implementation of policy and how these dynamics affect opportunities for learners. Later chapters will consider issues such as who participates, where people study, who pays, who becomes qualified and how far issues such as equity, quality and access pervade policy and practice. The analysis will seek to explore the

extent to which these more complex and subtle aspects of the respective systems point to greater or lesser divergence than the structural descriptions outlined above might suggest.

Finally, the broader political landscapes of all the countries of the UK will receive serious consideration in subsequent contributions. There had been a crisis of political legitimacy in Scotland and Wales in the 1980s and early 1990s, arising from the existence of a Conservative Government in Westminster, when Labour and Nationalist parties attracted the vast majority of electoral support in these two countries (Trench, 2009). Both had developed distinctive characteristics in terms of governance and policy, although these tended to be more evident in Scotland than in Wales. The way that devolution was introduced in 1999 resulted in different powers for Scotland and Wales. Scotland acquired both legislative and executive powers, whereas initially Wales was granted only the latter. Recently Wales has started to gain more legislative powers though in a rather patchwork and uncoordinated manner. Education and training, however, is one of the areas that has been fully devolved and thus has the potential for greater divergence. According to Trench, behind all this were pressures from both countries for greater levels of independence from Westminster and a Labour Government in England prepared to bow to these demands. However, as Chapters 7 and 8 point out, this fine political balance could well be disrupted by the election of a UK Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government.

## **Chapters in the book**

This volume is divided into three major sections. Section 1 considers national contexts and approaches to policy. This is followed by a section on organisation,

governance and practice. Section 3 concludes the book with two chapters devoted to possible future directions.

*Chapter 2* seeks to explain the distinctive policy trajectory that England has followed over the last two decades or more on post-compulsory education and lifelong learning by reference to its underlying ideological and theoretical bases and the associated concepts and images that have been generated as a result. It also probes some of the forces that are now starting to contest and disrupt this narrative, including the development by the devolved administrations of different and competing stories about where policy needs to go next. In particular, it considers the impact of the UK Commission on Employment and Skills as an institution that appears increasingly to be questioning the fundamental tenets upon which English skills policy has been founded.

*Chapter 3* explores the distinctive approaches to policy development in post-compulsory education and lifelong learning in Scotland. While the chapter focuses mainly on developments post devolution and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, these are set in the context of earlier developments which continue to influence policy and provision. Two distinct phases of policy are identified - the first associated with the Labour/Liberal Democrat coalitions, which governed Scotland during the first eight years after devolution and the second since the Scottish National Party (SNP) assumed control of the Scottish Government, following the elections in 2007. The chapter assesses the implications of these two approaches for the development of national structures, which have been established to enable the pursuit of different policy objectives.

*Chapter 4* sets out to use the Welsh experience over recent times (and especially since the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999) to highlight

three analytical themes relating to the development of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning. The first considers how far policy trajectories in Wales are 'path dependent', that is whether policies are shaped by what has gone before. The second theme focuses on the extent to which policies are underpinned by political ideology and the shaping role of powerful groups within Welsh civil society. The final theme is that of the wider political economy within which policies on post-compulsory education and lifelong learning are located. Again, the Welsh case is especially illuminating with respect not only to the constraints imposed on policy outcomes by the exigencies of wider economic conditions; but also the equally significant effects generated by the funding imperatives embodied in the devolution settlement itself.

*Chapter 5* provides a description of how the three national systems in England, Scotland and Wales are organised and operate in practice. The chapter reflects on patterns of learner participation and the issues these raise in their respective countries, current organisational arrangements and key debates, the future direction of policy and areas for further reform. In doing so, it raises issues about the nature and role of the state, the main policy players and the relationship between national, regional and local governance and institutional arrangements in each of the countries. The chapter highlights implications for the conduct of policy and the effects of organisational arrangements on learners, education professionals and wider stakeholders, such as employers.

*Chapter 6* presents an account of the consequences of policy processes and structures for providers, at the level of the further education colleges. The fundamental question here is whether (and if so to what extent) the sorts of differences that are discussed elsewhere in the book impact on practices. The chapter draws on interviews with senior college leaders from England, Scotland and Wales, including those that participated in the seminar series. It also makes use of

the concept of 'learning culture' developed in an earlier TLRP research project. Some key points of similarity and difference are signalled in the relationship between colleges and policy processes in England, Scotland and Wales. These concern contexts for collaboration, mission, voice and connectedness to policy and relationships to quality regimes.

*Chapter 7* explores the role of the wider contexts of the state, markets and democracy in shaping the reform of public services and post-compulsory education and lifelong learning across the four countries of the UK. In doing so, it explores the processes of 'convergence' and 'divergence', as the relationship between the assemblies and parliaments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the UK Westminster Government may be becoming more unpredictable. The chapter also touches on the concept of 'policy learning', why this has been so problematic across the four countries of the UK and what conditions might make it more possible. It concludes with a brief discussion of 'post-devolution politics' and what this might signify for the UK as a political entity.

Finally *Chapter 8* draws together some of the key themes arising from previous chapters in the book and their influences on convergence and divergence between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The chapter then briefly discusses the new UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government's approach to policy in this area and suggests how this might affect the governments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The book concludes with three possible scenarios for the future of education and training policy in the UK and speculates about the extent to which policies in the four countries may diverge further in the future.

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