

Chapter 8. Post-compulsory education and lifelong learning across the UK: moving from managed divergence to a new period of uncertainty

Ann Hodgson, Ken Spours, Martyn Waring, Jim Gallacher, Ewart Keep and Gareth Rees

Introduction

The writing and publication of this book has taken place at an important political juncture with the election of the new UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government. The book as a whole, and this chapter in particular, provides the opportunity to look back over the past two decades, which include successive Labour Governments in Westminster and parliamentary devolution in Scotland, Wales and latterly in Northern Ireland. This was a period of considerable change in which post-compulsory education, skills and lifelong learning remained a high-profile policy area across all the countries of the UK because of its association with competitiveness in an increasingly globalised world economy and its role in supporting social inclusion (e.g. Leitch, 2006; DEL, 2010), civic participation (e.g. Webb Review, 2007) and the development of a fairer society (The Scottish Government, 2007).

Reflecting on the period since 1999 and parliamentary devolution in Scotland and Wales, we discuss underlying trends influencing convergence and divergence of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning between the four countries of the

UK. We then briefly examine the emerging policy framework from the new UK Coalition Government elected in May 2010 and its potential implications.

In the final part of the chapter, we outline three scenarios to explore two key questions:

1. From an assessment of the early messages emerging from the new UK Coalition Government, what is the likely direction of policy for post-compulsory education and lifelong learning?
2. Will the process of divergence identified in earlier chapters of the book increase as a result of UK-wide economic pressures?

We conclude by suggesting that what started out in the book as a discussion about convergence or divergence of policy in post-compulsory education and lifelong learning may become part of a much wider debate about the future of the UK state as a political entity.

The processes of convergence and divergence

Throughout the book we have highlighted similarities and differences between the post-compulsory education and lifelong learning systems of the UK. Overall, it could be argued that a process of divergence is taking place in a number of key areas between England on the one hand and Scotland and Wales on the other. It is more difficult to fully include Northern Ireland in this analysis because devolution has only been recently restored and there has been a very specific history of division between religious and political communities that powerfully affected the education system. But

even here, according to Gallagher (2010), contrasting policy processes have begun to emerge between England and Northern Ireland, with the latter experiencing a more democratic style of policy development in relation to curriculum reform. Furthermore, proposed budget deficit strategies by the UK Coalition Government are likely to fuel tensions between the devolved government in Stormont and Westminster, with the major parties on either side of the sectarian divide (DUP and Sinn Fein) in Northern Ireland, who now form the Northern Ireland Executive, having to work together to respond to deep cuts in public services (BBC, 2010).

As previous chapters have pointed out, this move towards greater divergence is underpinned by wider historical, cultural, economic and political factors in which the four countries of the UK have had different experiences of new public management, the role of local government and the balances of the public and private sectors. While England fully embraced the neo-liberal reforms associated with Conservative Governments during the 1980s and early 1990s and, as we have seen, largely continued by New Labour, this was not the case for Scotland and Wales. They continued along their established broadly pre-Thatcherite trajectories. Interwoven with issues of national identity, these wider historical, cultural and political factors have affected underlying policy assumptions and become a framework for policy-makers in the respective countries, influencing how post-compulsory education and lifelong learning is conceptualised and even which terminology should be used.

The greatest areas of difference appear to be in relation to national and local governance arrangements and the ways that policy-making takes place, with greater affordances for the professional voice in Scotland, Wales and now possibly in Northern Ireland. Here size matters. The relatively small populations of Scotland (around 5 million), Wales (around 3 million) and Northern Ireland (less than 2 million) in comparison with England (51 million) create the potential for more collaborative

working in the three smaller countries between ministers and their policy officials on the one hand and stakeholders with a direct interest in policy development on the other. As earlier chapters in the book have pointed out, it is possible for all providers to get into one room with the relevant policy-makers in these countries. There are also marked differences in the areas of qualifications and institutional collaboration, in which Wales and Scotland have moved in a more unified and less competitive direction than England or Northern Ireland. Moreover, the basis of the economy, the reliance on public expenditure and the role of the public sector in employment opportunities are different in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland when compared with England (particularly with London and the South East). This latter factor is likely to assume much greater importance in an era of recession and UK Government imposed austerity.

On the other hand, we should not go too far with this line of argument. When viewed through an international lens, there are still considerable commonalities between the four countries of the UK, which might continue to limit divergence. These include the UK-wide labour market, the relatively weak role played by employers in the education and training system and largely shared qualifications across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Moreover, looking back over the period since 1997, it could be argued that there have been common themes of policy intervention in the four countries of the UK. Three stand out – an emphasis on raising skills levels, widening and increasing participation in learning and the use of qualifications as a key driver for change.

Nevertheless, the balance between divergence and convergence across the four countries is tipping towards the former. The underlying differences (in particular between England and Scotland and Wales) have been magnified through parliamentary devolution because education and training has been one of the areas

in which national governments have been able to exercise policy preferences. These differences are likely to increase because of the accumulation of recent policies and changes to organisational structures, which affect the ways in which future policy options are interpreted - see for example Graystone (2010) on the direction of FE in Wales. An internal logic begins to take hold and a national narrative and accepted direction of travel become increasingly powerful in policy-making. This, in turn, can prompt demands for more devolved powers, for example to allow greater financial autonomy and capacity to determine investment priorities, which over time would provide scope for further divergence in policy development. Added to this are new factors related to the election of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in Westminster, with its determination to substantially reduce public expenditure in order to tackle the budget deficit. These drastic measures will reveal the lack of macro-economic powers open to the devolved administrations (Bell, 2010), creating new points of tension between them and Westminster. The relationship between the four countries, their economies and (as one element of this) their education and training systems, thus appear more uncertain in this new political context.

The New UK Coalition Government policy approach – early indications

While in 2010 economics and budget deficit reduction dominated the political landscape, the UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition made a very active start in the area of education and training in England. Its policies on creating a new generation of Academies and a suite of Free Schools have grabbed the headlines, but behind this a number of early announcements on post-compulsory education, skills and lifelong learning point to important changes of emphasis as well as substance from the previous Labour Government.

Even at this early stage, it is possible to identify an emerging policy narrative and direction. In its initial statements, the Coalition appears to be significantly extending the previous Labour Government's emphasis on an education and training market, while attacking and reversing its managerialist approach (Cabinet Office, 2010). Moreover, it links the language of institutional autonomy and markets to fairness and tackling inequality, promoting lifelong learning, community and society in what is referred to as the 'post-bureaucratic age' (Chambers, 2010), all of which potentially resonate positively with education professionals. The recent Labour Government's record on performativity, accountability and micro-management, and its relative neglect of adult learning and inclusivity in England, have all provided opportunities for the Coalition to appeal to a range of audiences across the political spectrum.

Taking information from recent speeches, announcements and letters by ministers in the newly named ministries in England – the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills - it is possible to identify four related strands of policy – curriculum and qualifications, organisation and governance, learners and providers and employment and the work-based route – that comprise the main aspects of the Coalition's new agenda in post-compulsory education and lifelong learning.

Curriculum and qualifications

Prior to the election of the Coalition Government, think tanks close to the Conservative Party (e.g. Reform, Civitas and Policy Exchange) began publishing a number of influential policy documents on curriculum and qualifications (e.g. Bassett *et al.*, 2009; Richmond and Freedman, 2009; De Waal, 2009). Subsequent to this, the Conservative Party established an 'independent' commission under Sir Richard Sykes to look at the future of GCSEs and A Levels for England (Conservative Party,

2010). Together, these reports supported a greater focus on subject disciplines and knowledge rather than skills; a move towards more linear GCSEs and A Levels and the involvement of universities rather than quangos in the regulation and development of qualifications in England. More recently this support for traditional subjects and a concern for the decreasing number of 14-19 year olds studying science, history and modern and ancient languages has led Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, to announce his desire to introduce a new 'English Baccalaureate' award for 16 year olds that recognises achievement in English, mathematics, one humanities subject, one science and one foreign language, either modern or ancient. Moreover, he hinted that in an overhaul of examination league tables, the English Baccalaureate would become one of the major ways of measuring school performance (Gove, 2010a).

One of the first announcements by Nick Gibb, Minister of State for Schools, halted the development of the 'Stage 4' Diploma lines in Humanities, Languages and Science and lifted restrictions on state schools in England offering the iGCSE, a qualification that has proved popular in independent schools (DfE, 2010a). This was followed by a speech to the Sixth Form Colleges Forum in which he announced the decision to revoke the statutory requirement on local authorities in England to make the full suite of 14 Diplomas available to all learners in their locality (DfE, 2010b). Subsequently, Michael Gove has appointed Professor Alison Wolf, a recognised expert on vocational learning and a contributor to the Sykes Review, to lead a review of all vocational qualifications for 14-19 year olds (Gove, 2010b).

These changes, while presented by the Minister as part of schools and colleges in England being given 'greater freedom to offer the qualifications employers and universities demand', might also be seen as reflecting a desire to uphold a traditional approach to the study of academic disciplines. These freedoms, reinforced by the

availability of new linear GCSE and A Level syllabuses, alongside the current modular variants, and the involvement of selector universities in qualifications development are likely to result in a division *within* general education in the English system. They will provide a basis that allows selector universities and courses to make offers contingent on students achieving high grades in linear syllabuses, providing that they are confident that sufficiently large numbers of high performing students will take them. At the same time, the UK Coalition Government will strongly support Apprenticeships and established vocational qualifications such as BTEC and City and Guilds awards, with clearer routes from FE and Apprenticeship into higher education. The cumulative effects of these reforms could result in a redrawing of the binary divide in higher education in England with a sharper division between academic and vocational pathways.

Organisation and governance

Potential divisions in the area of curriculum and qualifications in England may also be matched and supported by stronger delineation between different types of education provider. Michael Gove's first announcement (DfE, 2010c), as Secretary of State for Education, focused on the creation of hundreds of new Academies in England drawn primarily from the highest attaining schools, both primary and secondary. The UK Coalition Government has also voiced its support for Lord Baker's idea to establish a number of University Technical Colleges (UTCs)/Technical Academies – 14-19 institutions focusing on vocational courses and apprenticeships in particular sectors and supported by a local university (Cabinet Office, 2010). The first is to be established in Birmingham and supported by Aston University. It has since been suggested that UTCs may be a positive way forward for failing schools (Garner, 2010).

While the previous Labour Administration also established a number of Academies in England, their purpose of replacing failing schools, largely in urban areas, with highly resourced institutions directly funded by Whitehall was very different. The UK Coalition Government policies in this area potentially recreate tripartism within the school system in England - Academies become the new Grammar Schools, UTCs the new Technical Schools and the remaining maintained local authority schools, the Secondary Moderns. Together with the later announcement on the creation of 'Free Schools'ⁱ, this approach to reform will further diversify the institutional landscape and could draw resources away from lower performing schools that remain under local authority control.

More importantly for post-compulsory education and lifelong learning in England, these announcements are likely to lead to an increase in the number of small sixth forms in Academies and to greater competition between colleges, schools and sixth form colleges for high attaining students and scarce resources. Not only does the introduction of new and competing institutions make the English system more complex and divided at the age of 16, it also risks it becoming less efficient and less equitable. Higher achievers are more likely to be able to study at the institution of their choice, whereas many lower achievers will be channelled towards general further education colleges, where in England funding has been, and will probably continue to be, less generous.

In relation to governance arrangements, the UK Coalition Government has started with its own 'bonfire of the quangos', which it justifies via financial and anti-bureaucracy arguments (Cable, 2010). In the area of education and training in England, to date it has abolished a number of quangos including the Teachers' Development Agency (TDA), the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA), and the General Teaching Council (GTC). There was also talk before the

election of a new funding agency, similar to the old FEFC, which would simplify the 'quangocracy' for post-compulsory education and lifelong learning in England (Conservative Party, 2008). In the event, the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) has been made responsible for funding 14-19 education and training in FE colleges, sixth form colleges and other training providers directly, while local authorities retain the strategic overview of provision and needs in this area, as well as responsibility for funding schools and school sixth forms (Gove, 2010c). This leaves the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), which is housed within the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, responsible for funding 19+ education and training outside higher education. These arrangements effectively reduce the role of local authorities in 14-19 education and training while apparently leaving the 'quangocracy' inherited from the Labour Government largely intact, at least for the time being. There is also an emerging sense that the UK Coalition Government is less wedded to the idea of a distinct 14-19 phase than the previous government.

On the other hand, much has already been said by the Coalition about transferring power from national government to localities and the people. However, the its plans, as so far revealed, suggest an interesting tension between 'freedom' and control, and between what the DfE conceives of as freedom, and how the concept might be interpreted by ministers. Michael Gove's 'freedom' for schools (from local authority control) comes at the price of even greater powers for the Secretary of State for Education. As Peter Newsam noted in a letter to *The Guardian*:

'It will give this, and any future education secretary in England, unprecedented powers, exercisable without reference to any elected body; opening a school whenever he wants; deciding where any individual school should be built; funding any school he likes on any terms he chooses, or, after due notice, ceasing to fund any school contracted to him whenever he likes....The

untrammelled concentration of power in the hands of a single government minister was what the Butler Education Act of 1944, now effectively dismantled in a couple of days, was careful to avoid'.

Newsam, 2010: 33

Learners and providers

The key message from the UK Coalition Government in the first few months of taking Office has been that institutional autonomy and freedom from bureaucracy will allow schools and colleges in England to respond better to the needs of their local communities. In terms of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning, John Hayes (Minister for Further Education and Lifelong Learning) and Vince Cable (Secretary of State for the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills) made a number of speeches in support of the FE sector and adult and community learning (e.g. Cable, 2010, Hayes, 2010a). FE is seen as the main provider of vocational education and skills development, support for employers and Apprenticeships and community learning, and as playing an increasingly important role in higher education (Willetts, 2010).

The new Government has also sent a clear message to the FE sector in England that it wants to facilitate a stronger professional voice in policy-making via a range of bodies such as the Association of Learner Providers, the Association of Colleges and FE Principals' Network (Hayes, 2010b), although this does not appear to extend to the teacher and lecturer unions. The advice of sector managers will be sought particularly around ways of reducing costs and bureaucracy.

With regard to learners, the UK Coalition Government intends to introduce Lifelong Learning Accounts in England and to have a stronger focus on adult information, advice and guidance to ensure that potential learners' needs are better served in what is regarded as a growing post-16 educational marketplace. There will also be a greater emphasis on higher education students studying near to home, creating partnerships between FE colleges and universities, for example via arrangements such as the London University External Programme, and supporting new progression routes between further education, Apprenticeship and higher education (Willetts, 2010).

Apprenticeships and the work-based route

While all UK governments over the last two decades have stressed the importance of Apprenticeships, as we have seen earlier, the work-based route has played a relatively minor role in expanding participation in education and training for 16-19 year olds. This Government, like others before it, wants to see the work-based route making up a larger proportion of the education and training system. So it too has highlighted the key role of Apprenticeships (Conservative Party, 2008; Cabinet Office, 2010). It justifies this in terms of the benefits of skills acquisition and returns to learning that can be accrued from close learner engagement with the world of work. To this end, one of the first actions of the new Administration has been to redirect £150 millions from Train to Gain (a scheme in England for incentivising employers to engage in training) to Apprenticeships in order to provide 50,000 extra places for young people. This is a somewhat different approach from that taken by the previous government, in which a range of work-related and college-led courses were rebadged as Apprenticeships in order to raise the status of vocational programmes and to reach targets for growth in this area. An increasing role for the work-based

route in England is also consistent with the UK Coalition Government's policy on general qualifications. It could be seen as providing an alternative form of education and training for those unwilling or unable to participate in a more 'rigorous' and narrowly-cast academic route.

Whatever policies the UK Coalition Government wishes to introduce, however, will be largely shaped by the wider economy and its approach to reducing the public debt. While funding for 16-19 year olds will be protected in 2010/11, it is likely that post-compulsory education and lifelong learning will experience serious cuts in funding from 2011/12 onwards and will be directly affected by the condition of the labour market. We will argue towards the end of this chapter that the prevailing economic climate and the UK Coalition Government's response to it will have a major shaping effect on potential scenarios for the future.

The UK Coalition Government's impact on the devolved administrations

It is important to reiterate the point that these changes in UK Government policy directly affect only England of the countries of the UK. It remains to be seen how far the policies of the devolved administrations will be influenced by the new direction taken by the Coalition Government at Westminster. Here, the crucial issue will be the extent to which they will be able to 'insulate' their jurisdictions from the policies being implemented in England, especially now that the ideological gap between them is likely to be even greater than it has been hitherto. Indeed, it seems likely that education and training policies will provide one arena in which any new dynamic between Westminster and the governments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast will be worked out – or, perhaps, fought over.

More specifically, in the case of Wales, future relationships between the two governments are likely to be even more complex than they have been to date. Some of the changes being introduced in England will have an immediate impact in Wales. For example, many students in Wales take GCSEs and A-levels administered by examining authorities based in England; and it is unclear how far the Welsh Assembly Government and the Welsh Joint Examinations Council will pursue curriculum strategies significantly different from those adopted in England, although this is certainly possible. To the extent that the latter occurs, however, Welsh developments are likely to produce more porous boundaries between academic and vocational learning, under the auspices of the 14-19 Learning Pathways and providing further impetus to the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification.

Certainly, it seems very unlikely that organisational changes in Wales will lead to greater institutional differentiation, still less a reversion to a tripartite system. In fact, the direction of travel is moving towards much greater collaboration between schools, colleges and private training providers in the delivery of the post-compulsory curriculum (as well as elements of the 14-16 curriculum). Moreover, it is inconceivable in Wales that local authorities will not continue to play a central role in the delivery of education and training (except in higher education). Although the FE colleges remain outside local authority control, the emphasis on collaboration and organisational integration continues and will, no doubt, be a factor in the outcome of the review of FE college governance. Local authorities remain key partners in the development and implementation of all the strategies currently being instigated by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG).

The development of skills in workplaces is also likely to continue to be a key priority for the WAG. The economic circumstances in which this development takes place, however, are likely to be significantly different from other parts of the UK. Hence,

while skills demands from employers will remain a major concern of public policy, the effectiveness of initiatives in this area will continue to reflect the relative poverty of the Welsh economy and the enduring difficulties experienced in generating significant economic growth. It will be interesting in this regard to observe the implementation of the recent Economic Renewal Policy because it represents a shift in the balance of different types of government interventions to promote economic development in Wales.

More generally too, patterns of economic development - and changes in the financing of the public sector, more specifically - will determine the extent to which the WAG will have the resources to deliver its 'Welsh route' to the development of education and training provision. For this reason, there are likely to be particular 'flash-points' in the relations between Cardiff and Westminster over the determination of levels of funding through the block grant and the Barnett Formula, both in the run-up to and the aftermath of the election for the National Assembly for Wales to be held in 2011.

In Scotland there is little indication that the policy initiatives the Coalition Government is introducing in England will have any significant impact in the foreseeable future. It has been indicated in Chapters 3 and 5 that the process of policy formation and the institutional structures are, in many respects, quite different from England and this reflects not just divergences since devolution, but a longer history of development. As a result, many of the proposed changes in the schools sector and in the frameworks for governance of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning are really of little relevance in the Scottish context. The ideological thrust of the developments in England also has little support in Scotland.

There is, however, no doubt that the impact of the cuts in public expenditure will have significant implications for the organisation and provision of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning. The Scottish Government has delayed the imposition of financial restrictions, partly with the Scottish Parliamentary elections in May 2011 in mind. It is likely that it will only be after the 2011 elections, when a new Government is in place that clear new policy initiatives will emerge. While it seems probable that the new Government, of whatever political persuasion, will seek to encourage new approaches to delivering provision, which will both achieve greater efficiency and help tackle the issue of economic revival and growth, these are likely to involve further evolution within the system rather than radical change. We have already noted the relative strength of the college sector in Scotland and government policy has been to continue to support this sector in so far as that is possible. We have also noted in earlier chapters the extensive curriculum reform associated with the introduction of the 'Curriculum for Excellence' and this is likely to continue to be a major aspect of policy development in Scotland. It is likely that initiatives around skills development and vocational training will retain major importance and, in this respect, measures may be taken to improve the impact of the services currently provided by Skills Development Scotland. However, in all of these respects the major impact of the policies of the Coalition Government seems likely to be in the reductions in public expenditure and the consequences which these will have on Scotland's post-compulsory and lifelong learning system.

Future scenarios

Several months into the new UK Coalition Government and following its decision to substantially reduce the public debt over the period of one Parliament, it is possible

to view the relationships between the four countries of the UK during successive Labour Governments in a new light.

During a period in which parliamentary devolution was achieved for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and for most of which there was sustained economic growth (albeit on a fragile basis), the process of divergence between the countries now appears to have been largely about different political emphases. The previous Labour Government's policies have been seen as a mixture of neo-liberal and social democratic ideas, sometimes referred to as the 'Double Shuffle' (Hall, 2003).

Meanwhile Wales and Scotland continued to emphasise the latter over the former and through this to develop a distinctive narrative and approach to education and training policy. Moreover, the relatively buoyant condition of the economy, although affluence was not equally shared between nations and regions, permitted somewhat different interpretations of skill development and varying approaches to curriculum and qualifications, organisation, accountability and governance to emerge.

The election outcome changed all of this. We will suggest, as has already been stated in Chapter 7, that the economic crisis and the UK Coalition Government's approach to public debt reduction could alter the dynamic between the countries of the UK. We outline two possible scenarios for the next five years based on the degree to which the Government's economic strategy succeeds or fails.

Scenario 1: Debt reduction, private sector growth and a successful education and training market

The UK Coalition Government's hope is that the rapid reduction of the public debt, a reduced role for the state, together with incentives to the private and third sectors,

will produce a virtuous circle. First and foremost, the UK will retain its high international credit rating and the reduction in the role of the public sector will provide the space for the private sector to flourish and to move into new areas of activity. The resultant high rates of growth (e.g. 3%+ annually) will drive down unemployment by the end of the Parliament and increase employer demand for skills. The lifting of the burden of bureaucracy and state planning will allow autonomous institutions and communities, as part of a strong education and training market, to respond in innovative and locally responsive ways. This is seen as part of David Cameron's 'Big Society' agenda (Cameron, 2010). Strengthening learner demand for education and training through Lifelong Learning Accounts will also hold institutions to account, ensuring poor provision is eradicated and driving up the quality of learning.

Scenario 2: Debt reduction, double-dip recession and a reduced education and training system

An alternative and far less optimistic outcome is the prospect of a double-dip recession. In this scenario there is a downward spiral in which an overly rapid reduction in government spending leads to a sharp increase in unemployment, reduces consumer confidence and demand which, in turn, prevents the growth in the private sector needed to fill the gap left by a diminishing state. This scenario not only has an effect at the national level, but also becomes part of a new international economic crisis as a number of economies in the Eurozone follow a similar path.

The impact on education and training would be immediate because employer demand for skills would reduce and there would be fewer jobs and employer-supported Apprenticeship places and less employer training (Mason and Bishop, 2010). On top of this there would be sharp reductions in education and training

expenditure, leading to fewer providers and less provision. The state would be unable to respond adequately to the downturn and learners, many of them unemployed, would be unable to gain places on courses in post-compulsory and higher education. In such a context, Lifelong Learning Accounts might become a weak or even worthless currency. Providers would be forced to compete aggressively to remain financially viable, with an emphasis on cost reduction rather than quality or equity. Moreover, the preference of the UK Coalition Government for institutional diversity in England could also result in duplication of provision and the retention of inefficiencies within the system.

Regarding the potential impact of these two scenarios, it could be argued that Scenario 1 would, at best, be realised in parts of England, notably in London and the South East, where the private sector may be sufficiently strong to support it. Aspects of Scenario 2 are more likely in many other parts of the UK because of relatively low levels of private economic activity and the current compensatory role of the public sector (Harris, 2010).

Is there a Scenario 3?

Scenarios 1 and 2 are economically determinist and arguably downplay the state in the respective countries, either at national or local level, taking a more pro-active approach to the labour market, skills policy and education and training provision. The evidence provided in this book, however, suggests that there is a real possibility of a third scenario in which the processes of divergence in governance and policy produce distinctive responses to the budgetary crisis in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which differ markedly from that adopted for England by the UK Coalition Government. Here there may be both political and popular support for the

devolved governments to use more social democratic strategies. Even in England, there could be different approaches taken at institutional, local and city region levels based on the prevailing values of key policy-makers, institutional managers, trade unions and local government representatives.

With regards to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, policy-makers could decide that, even within greatly reduced budgets, active labour market planning and collaborative policies could be used to mitigate the effects of a weaker private sector and the power of an unregulated market. In all three countries, while the amount of funding for education and training will be less, devolved governments will have a degree of power over the distribution of resources between education and other devolved policy portfolios as well as over how, within education and training, they incentivise providers and determine which areas of policy or groups of learners take priority. For example, the skills utilisation policies currently being pursued in Scotland (and, more modestly, in Wales), the provision of high quality education and training programmes for the unemployed in Scotland and Wales, the more unified approach to the curriculum and the emphasis on collaboration between providers in all three countries could be continued or even strengthened. In this sense, Scenario 3 could be seen as resulting in a more managed and equitable approach to education and training and labour market policy based on direct intervention, degrees of state planning, a partnership approach and higher levels of political participation. While individual localities and city regions in England may find it more difficult to pursue this approach, because of the strong central steer by the UK Coalition Government and its pursuit of the ideology of the market, echoes of these strategies may also be possible when there is the political will to make them happen.

New directions in learning, skills and lifelong learning – divergence, convergence and uncertainty

So far we have talked in this book about what could be characterised as a manageable form of divergence between the four countries of the UK. By manageable we are referring to accepted differences in governance, policy and policy-making between England and the other three countries, particularly Wales and Scotland, without these threatening the UK as a political entity. In hindsight, however, we are able to see that these divergences were ameliorated not only by the act of parliamentary devolution itself, but also by the benefits accrued from economic growth and an increase in public expenditure under successive Labour Governments. All of this was to change dramatically in 2010 with the election of a UK Coalition Government and its early announcement of a deficit reducing budget (Directgov, 2010).

It may be possible to talk about three trends in terms of the directions for learning, skills and lifelong learning policy in the UK. The first refers to the recent experiences under Labour Governments and, in particular, the period since parliamentary devolution in 1999. There are several shared UK features of the respective home systems, particularly when viewed from a continental European perspective, and most notably in regard to the labour market and work-based routes. Nevertheless, during this period differences grew in relation to organisation, governance and also, in the case of Wales, qualifications. These differences were not principal sources of tension, but nor were they sources of policy learning (Raffe and Spours, 2007). They were simply accepted and seen as a legitimate outcome of devolution. In the Scottish case, however, the election of a minority Scottish National Party Government in 2007

changed the tone of policy in that country with more demands for greater powers for the Scottish Government. Chapter 7 emphasises that the UK Labour Government of the time had considerable political interest in managing this relationship because any fragmentation of the UK could rob it of its Scottish and Welsh strongholds and consign it to opposition for a generation or more in an English government if general elections became nationally based.

A second trend could be seen to be opening up with the election of the UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government because its early policies in education and lifelong learning will lead to further accumulating differences between England, on the one hand, and Scotland and Wales on the other. The Government in Westminster is about to embark on a wave of market-based reforms (e.g. Academies and Free Schools), together with qualifications changes (e.g. to A Levels) that may deepen the academic/vocational divide. It is hard to imagine Wales and Scotland following suit. Instead, they are likely to hold to the course they have pursued since 1999 which, as we have seen, has already produced significant divergence. The result will be that the education and training systems in those countries begin to look more dramatically different from England's.

A third trend might open up around the economy and public expenditure. As Chapter 7 argues, what could have been regarded as a unifying or integrating factor under Labour Governments could suddenly become a point of major tension between England and the three other countries of the UK, because of the relative importance of public expenditure and investment to the latter. In response, there are already signs that the Scottish Government will push for full fiscal independence and it is difficult not to imagine that Wales too will be looking for a greater acquisition of powers over its economic future, as the Holtham Commission (Independent Commission on Funding and Finance for Wales, 2010) has indicated. What could

occur is that more social democratic political formations in Scotland and Wales could employ a radically different political interpretation with regards to the role of the national state, local government, public services and skills, in which different political values and social priorities will be brought to the fore.

Of course, how this unfolds will depend on political developments in all three countries. The relationships might continue to be managed and even some sort of convergence could emerge based on a number of 'ifs' - if the UK Coalition Government plans are successfully resisted in England and elsewhere in the UK; if greater fiscal powers are indeed devolved; if the respective government responses to the 'new austerity' have common features; and if the Labour parties in Scotland and Wales recover sufficiently to push back nationalist sentiment. All these 'ifs' are possible, but the balance of probability may be against all of them happening together.

Whatever the outcome, we are undoubtedly entering a much more unstable and uncertain period. It may be overly dramatic to talk about the potential break-up of the UK in its broader sense, but as Chapter 7 points out, the looming radical reduction in public expenditure will put pressure on the UK as a political entity. Greater divergence and, in all likelihood, the devolution of greater powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, could also reinforce the realisation that the missing link in the devolution debate is the absence of an entity called the English Government.

However, increasing divergence, which is the most probable outcome, should not deter us from seeking to promote policy learning and collaboration as part of what we have termed 'post-devolution politics'. This is particularly important in relation to post-compulsory education and lifelong learning where there are not only clear UK-wide interests (for example, in relation to skills and the economy), but also strong

examples of good practice emerging in each of the four countries that merit wider consideration across the UK. In an era of financial constraint, however this might be mediated in each of the different countries, there are clear advantages in using the knowledge already present within the UK to improve the quality of the education and training systems in each of the four countries. Perhaps it is time that politicians stopped thinking that the grass is always greener elsewhere and paused to reflect on what can be learnt from an examination of policies and practices closer to home.

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ⁱ Free Schools are an idea based on the Swedish system – they are independent of local authorities and funded direct from the Department of Education. Sets of parents, community groups or other organisations have been invited to submit plans for such schools to the Secretary of State for consideration. To date, very few groups have come forward.