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**Citation for published version:**

Gallacher, J & Raffe, D 2011, 'Higher education policy in post-devolution UK: more convergence than divergence?' *Journal of Education Policy*, vol 27, no. 4, pp. 467-490. DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2011.626080

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/02680939.2011.626080](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2011.626080)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

*Journal of Education Policy*

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

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Gallacher, J., & Raffe, D. (2011). Higher education policy in post-devolution UK: more convergence than divergence?. *Journal of Education Policy*, 27(4), 467-490

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# **Higher Education policy in post-devolution UK: more convergence than divergence?**

*In Journal of Education Policy (2013), vol 27, no 4, pp.467-490.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Many researchers studying the impact of parliamentary devolution conclude that education policies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are diverging. They attribute this to five factors: the redistribution of formal powers associated with devolution; differences in values, ideologies and policy discourses across the four territories; the different composition, interests and policy styles of their policy communities; the different 'situational logics' of policy-making; and the mutual independence of policy decisions in the different territories. This article reviews trends in higher education policy across the UK since parliamentary devolution. It focuses on policies for student fees and student support, for widening participation, for supporting research and for the higher education contribution to economic development, skills and employability. On balance it finds as much evidence of policy convergence, or at least of constraints on divergence, as of policy divergence. It argues that each of the five factors claimed to promote divergence can be associated with corresponding pressures for convergence.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This paper draws on presentations to the seminar series on *Mass Higher Education in UK and International Contexts*, held in 2006-08 and jointly funded by the Scottish and English governments and funding councils. An earlier version was presented to a seminar in the School of Education, University of Edinburgh, in January 2011. We are grateful to participants at the seminar and to Philip Gummet, Terry Mayes, Bob Osborne, Lindsay Paterson, Terry Rees, Peter Scott and two anonymous referees for comments and suggestions. Responsibility for the views and interpretations expressed in the paper rests with the authors.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1998-99 powers over education and training were devolved from the UK Parliament at Westminster to the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly.<sup>(1)</sup> The devolution settlement was asymmetrical: it left England with no Parliament of its own and the powers it devolved varied across the three administrations (Keating 2002, Jeffery 2006a). Moreover, it was not a clean break with the past; it followed a process of administrative devolution in which powers had been devolved to the territorial departments of the UK government, or to territorial agencies such as the Scottish and Welsh Higher Education Funding Councils that were established in 1992. Nevertheless, parliamentary devolution was widely expected to lead to policy divergence, and this expectation seemed to be confirmed when one of the first decisions of the new Scottish Executive abolished up-front tuition fees. At the time of writing, the UK government's decision to raise student fees and develop a market-driven higher education (HE) system in England, and the stated intentions of the Scottish and Welsh administrations to find alternative solutions, may appear to herald further divergence.

In this paper we review HE policies across the UK since 1999, and examine the extent to which parliamentary devolution has resulted in policy divergence. We argue that, despite clear and highly visible instances of divergence, there are continuing pressures for convergence, or for limiting the degree of divergence, which may prove more powerful in the long term. We focus mainly on England, Scotland and Wales; the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended for much of this period, including from 2002-2007, and its impact on HE policy has so far been limited (Osborne 2007). Policy convergence or divergence can be defined in terms of the goals, content, instruments, outcomes or style of policy (Bennett 1991); in this paper we focus on goals, content and instruments. Policy styles, along with policy discourses and ideologies, are treated as possible sources of convergence or divergence.

Several educational researchers and political scientists have examined the impact of parliamentary devolution on education policy across the UK administrations. Some have examined this impact in a specific territory: for example Humes (2008) and Gallacher (2008) for Scotland, Rees (2007, 2011) and Fitz (2007) for Wales and Donnelly et al. (2006) and Osborne (2006, 2007) for Northern Ireland. Other researchers have examined policy trends across the four administrations, or sometimes the three 'home countries' of Great Britain, in such fields as secondary education (Phillips 2003, Raffe 2006, Arnott and Menter 2007), teacher education (Menter et al. 2006), HE (Keating 2005, Rees and Taylor 2006, Trench 2008a), work-based learning (Reeve et al. 2007), skills (Keep et al. 2010) and lifelong learning (Hodgson et al. 2011). These studies complement research on other policy fields such as health care (Greer 2005) and transport (Shaw et al. 2009). They contribute to a broader literature on the political and social implications of devolution which includes the publications of the ESRC programme

on *Devolution and Constitutional Change* from 2001-06, the Constitution Unit and the Institute for Public Policy Research (Keating 2005, Adams and Schmuecker 2006, Jeffery 2006a, 2007, Trench 2007, 2008b, Greer 2009, Lodge and Schmuecker 2010).

According to Greer and Jarman (2008, 167) '[t]he story of post-devolution politics in the UK is one of policy divergence.' Other researchers are more equivocal and emphasise the complex, changeable and variable nature of the impacts of parliamentary devolution; nevertheless, most of the studies cited above suggest that on balance the trend has been for policies to diverge, especially between Wales and Scotland on the one hand and England on the other. And even where policy divergence is found to be limited or problematic it nevertheless provides one of the main framing questions for research on post-devolution education policy. It is attributed to at least five factors which are sometimes explicit, and at other times implicit, in this research.

First, and most obviously, policy divergence is attributed to the formal redistribution of power effected by the devolution settlement. Most areas of education policy were already administered on a territorial basis by the Scottish and Welsh Offices and the Department of Education for Northern Ireland, but after 1999 these ceased to be departments of the UK government, accountable to the UK Parliament at Westminster, and became accountable - as the Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government and Northern Ireland Executive - to their own Parliament or Assembly. Voters in each territory could, in principle, choose their own policy direction. Policy divergence was made more likely by the terms of the devolution settlement, in particular by the absence of any framework legislation or value system to underpin devolution and set limits to divergence, by the weakness of formal inter-governmental relations, and by the permissive financial arrangements. These features, which make the UK very different from most other federal or quasi-federal states, lead Greer to describe the devolution settlement as a 'fragile divergence machine' (Greer 2007, Jeffrey 2006a).

Second, policy divergence is attributed to different political values, ideologies and policy priorities, which in turn reflect different discourses, cultures and traditions in the four territories. In Scotland and Wales, it is commonly argued, policy-makers place more emphasis on social and personal goals of education compared with economic goals; there is a stronger commitment to social inclusion and to public provision and less enthusiasm for 'neo-liberal' ideas (Egan and James 2003, Paterson 2003a). Keating (2009, 112) describes divergent models of social citizenship in Scotland and Wales, compared with England: 'Individually the differences on public service provision are often small but they point in a consistent direction, towards more universalism, less privatisation, less competition and more collaboration among government, professions and citizens.'

The third and related source of divergence is the distinctive policy community of each territory. This is particularly the case in Scotland, where, before 1999,

education and the law provided 'professional enclaves within the Scottish/British system of government enjoying a degree of autonomy from politics as a whole, even from the politicians in the Scottish Office' (Keating 2009, 99). However, the differences in scale (England's population of 50 million population contrasts with the 5 million or fewer of the other territories), in the institutional fragmentation of the education systems and in the social, religious and geographical fractures within each territory, make it unsurprising that the policy communities of the four territories should differ in their backgrounds, interests, composition, cohesion and policy styles (Greer and Jarman 2008, Rees 2011). Policy-making resembles a 'collaborative' model in Scotland and Wales more than in England, where a 'politicised' model has dominated (Raffe and Spours 2007).

These first three factors refer to aspects of the policy process which differ across the home countries resulting in policy divergence. The fourth factor refers to differences in the situational logic of policy-making, consistent with a more rationalist model of policy-making. The different circumstances of the four home countries, including the different size, structure and organisation of their education systems and their different social and economic contexts, present different policy problems and challenges and influence the most effective way to address them. For example, policy in Wales is influenced by the geographically dispersed population and by the cultural and social role of the Welsh language; HE policy in Scotland is shaped by the four-year degree structure and the role of colleges as key providers.

A further aspect of the situational logic of policy-making is the mutual independence of the education systems: the extent to which policies made in one UK territory do not constrain the options for policy-makers in the other territories. Many analyses of policy divergence assume such independence, although they rarely make this assumption explicit; we therefore treat it as the fifth factor in the explanation of policy divergence.

Although divergence provides the framing question for much research on post-devolution education policy, this research reveals a complex mixture of convergent and divergent policy trends. We draw attention to two aspects of this complexity. First, except for the first (the formal redistribution of power), the factors listed above would only lead to policy divergence under parliamentary devolution to the extent that policies had not been able to differ under administrative devolution. Where policies already differed, as for example in many aspects of secondary school policy, these factors often generated national path dependence and policy continuity rather than divergence (Raffe 2006). We return to this point below.

[Figure 1 about here]

Second, there is a direct correspondence between the five factors that are claimed to generate divergence in the context of devolution and factors that are claimed to underlie policy convergence in the context of the internationalisation of

HE. In this paper we use the term internationalisation rather than globalisation (Scott 1999); Teichler (2004) defines internationalisation as the increased interaction across national boundaries rather than the erosion of those boundaries, although it may involve changed modes of national steering. In this perspective, similar to a transformationalist view of globalisation, internationalisation does not inevitably lead to convergence any more than devolution inevitably leads to divergence; our point is rather that convergence (or its absence) provides a framing question for research on internationalisation, much as divergence (or its absence) does for research on devolution.

In Figure 1 the five factors discussed above are expanded to provide an analytical frame which embraces explanations both for divergence and for convergence. Thus, whereas the devolution literature focuses on the redistribution of power downwards from the UK 'national' level, the internationalisation literature examines its redistribution upwards towards supra-national bodies such as the European Commission and the bodies administering the Bologna process (Keeling 2006, Dale and Robertson 2009). The divergent effects of distinctive national values, cultures and traditions may be contrasted with the influence of 'travelling policies' and global discourses (Green 1999, Ozga 2003, Karseth and Solbrekke 2010). As policy communities become more global they may also be a source of convergence, perhaps especially in HE with its international mission and the influence of bodies such as the OECD. The situational logic of policy may similarly be a source of convergence rather than divergence, if HE systems around the world face similar problems and challenges, such as those arising from 'massification' and the need to pay for it (Altbach 2008). And if internationalisation increases the interdependence of HE systems, the policy options available to any one country may be constrained by the decisions of others.

In the next section we summarise policy trends since 1999 in four areas: student fees and support, widening participation, the funding and support of research, and the contribution of HE to economic development, skills and employability. Our analysis is based on policy documents published by the UK government and the three devolved administrations since 1999, on presentations and discussions at a series of six seminars on *Mass Higher Education in UK and International Contexts*, held in 2006-08,(2) and on secondary sources cited in the text. In the final section of the paper we review the aspects of divergence and convergence and relate these trends to the framework summarised in Figure 1.

## **2. POLICY TRENDS SINCE 1999**

### **2.1 Student fees and student support**

'Cost sharing' (Johnstone 2006) - sharing the costs of HE among government, learners, their parents, graduates and others - is perhaps the issue where devolution has led to the most significant differences among the home countries. Shortly after it came to power in 1997 the Labour Government introduced tuition

fees for HE students across the UK. Initially set at £1,000, with reductions or exemptions for poorer students, these were paid up-front by students at the beginning of each year of their course. However when the first Scottish Parliament was elected in 1999 the Liberal Democrats insisted that HE should be free at the point of entry and made the abolition of tuition fees a condition of entering a coalition government with Labour. A committee of inquiry, chaired by Andrew Cubie, was set up to consider alternatives. It recommended the establishment of a graduate endowment of £3,000 which graduates would begin to pay after their earnings exceeded £25,000. There would also be bursaries for students from low-income families. The government implemented an amended version of these recommendations in which graduates were liable to repay £2,000 when their income exceeded £10,000. Graduates could add the graduate endowment to their student loan, and the repayment system was administered by the Student Loan Company.

The Scottish 'Cubie' arrangements attracted considerable interest elsewhere in the UK, and were advocated as the preferable solution by reviews in Wales and Northern Ireland. However in neither case did it prove possible to implement these proposals. In Wales the first Rees Review (2001) proposed an 'end loaded, income contingent, finite graduate endowment contribution'. However the Assembly had no powers to introduce these changes. As a result the review group recommended that they should be proposed to the UK government. In Northern Ireland an Assembly Committee initiated its own review of the issues, which recommended the 'Scottish model' with some variations; however, there was insufficient support within the power-sharing government to secure the implementation of these proposals (Osborne 2007).

In 2005, in response to perceived funding shortfalls, the UK government introduced legislation which enabled universities in England to charge students variable or top-up fees of up to £3,000 per annum. The higher level of fees indicated divergence, but the method of payment indicated convergence towards the Scottish position: students could defer payment until after graduation, and payments were only triggered when their incomes exceeded a given threshold (£15,000) and were subject to a time limit. In Northern Ireland, where no devolved government was in place at the time, variable fees were introduced on a similar basis to England. In both of these territories elaborate systems of student support were introduced at the same time to offset the impact of the new fee regime. This will be discussed further below under widening participation. In Wales the Second Rees Review recommended the introduction of a system of deferred flexible fees of up to £3,000 for full-time students. This was to be accompanied by a Learning Grant for both full-time and part-time students and a National Bursary funded by top-up fees (Rees Review 2005). However, the minority Labour government was unable to obtain support for this proposal; eventually it was agreed to establish a flexible fee of up to £3,000 beginning in 2007/08, one year later than England, but also to provide a non-means-tested grant of £1800 for all Welsh-domiciled students attending Welsh institutions. This



grant was discontinued from 2010, while an income-contingent Learning Grant of up to £5000 was available to help cover costs associated with study.

The coalition government in Scotland made no attempt to follow England in introducing variable fees. In 2007 the SNP took office after campaigning on a pledge to abolish all student debt. Its promise to replace loans with grants was not fulfilled, but it abolished the graduate endowment, ensuring that students who graduated in 2007 or later would make no direct contribution to the cost of their HE. The government argued that this would reduce the burden of debt which graduates carried into the labour market, and that the graduate endowment was an 'inefficient' way of supporting HE. It noted that most students increased their student loan to pay the endowment, and 'due to the inefficiency of the system, only two thirds of this income was then returned to the public purse' (Scottish Government 2008).

In October 2010 the Browne review proposed lifting the cap on the fees charged by HE institutions in England (Browne Report 2010). The UK coalition government broadly accepted this proposal, although it retained a fee cap at £9000 per annum and required universities that charged above £6000 to meet more stringent conditions on widening participation and fair access. Payment of fees would be deferred until after graduation, when repayments of fees and loans would start at an income of £21,000. Students from lower income households would also be eligible to receive a grant to cover living costs and some of the fee costs (see below in the discussion of widening participation). The government's public spending review a few days later announced a 40 per cent cut in government spending on HE. This would largely fall on teaching which would be wholly supported by fees except in a few priority and high-cost subjects such as science, mathematics and medicine. The June 2011 White Paper (BIS 2011) gave further details of these proposals and presented them as part of a drive to develop a market-led HE system driven by informed student demand,

The Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Governments indicated differing responses to this situation. In December 2010 the Scottish Government (2010) published a Green Paper which discussed options, including a graduate contribution and a graduate tax, which could establish a 'sustainable Scottish solution for the future of higher education'. Responses were invited by the end of February 2011. Following the outcome of this consultation, and the report of a technical working group established 'to consider the size and nature of any gap in funding between north and south of the border which may be opening up...', the Cabinet Secretary announced that he estimated that the funding gap would be £93 million by 2014/15. On this basis the SNP Government, in the run-up to the Scottish Parliament election in May 2011, concluded that it would not be necessary to introduce any form of fee or graduate contribution to fund HE in Scotland. The SNP won the election and in June 2011 the government confirmed that no fee or graduate contribution would be introduced for Scottish domiciled

students, but Scottish universities would be allowed to charge fees of up to £9,000 per annum to students from elsewhere in the UK.

In Wales a rather different approach was taken. The Minister stated that 'we do not support full-cost or near full-cost fees. We do not believe that higher education should be organised on the basis of a market' (WAG 2010). Welsh universities would be permitted to introduce fee increases similar to those in England; however the Welsh Assembly Government would pay the additional costs for Welsh-domiciled students, including students attending universities elsewhere in the UK.

In Northern Ireland a review of variable fees earlier in 2010 saw no reason to change the status quo but acknowledged that change might be necessary if fees were to rise in England (Stuart 2010). Following the UK government's decision to raise fees in England, the Minister requested an update to the Stuart Review. This recommended an increased cap on fees in universities in Northern Ireland from £3,290 to between £5000 and £5,750, and the introduction of the UK Government fee structure for non-home-domiciled students studying at Northern Ireland institutions. It also recommended the introduction of a threshold of £21,000 and the enhancement of maintenance grants (Stuart 2011). It emphasised the need to maintain Northern Ireland's participation rates among students from less advantaged socio-economic groups, which were higher than the UK average. A public consultation, based on a range of options, closed in June 2011; an increase in fees is expected to follow but none has been announced at the time of writing.

The English fee increase and the responses of the devolved administrations therefore appear to herald a renewed policy divergence. However these responses are complex and are being driven by a range of factors, among which the situational logics of HE funding and the interdependence of the four systems are prominent. It is clear that all four administrations are facing similar pressures on public spending, and are having to consider the implications for the funding of HE. These pressures are not unique to the UK, and are faced by most HE systems around the globe (Johnstone 2006). It is also clear that the decisions regarding the funding of HE in England are having a very significant impact on policy-making in the three other UK countries. This has been explicitly recognized in the Ministerial statements in both Wales and Northern Ireland (WAG 2010; DELNI 2010) and the work of the technical working group set up by the Scottish Government. In all three administrations the size and trend of the 'funding gap', defined through comparison with England and therefore shaped by the English fees policy, has become a key feature of the policy debate.

The solutions which are now emerging reflect elements of convergence but also the opportunities for the devolved administrations to take their own paths and their desires to develop solutions which they see as being appropriate in their own circumstances. In Wales the UK coalition's approach of lifting the fee cap,

requiring graduate contributions, and expecting universities charging higher fees to meet demanding fee policy agreements have all been accepted; a similar outcome is likely in Northern Ireland. However both of these administrations have ameliorated the impact of these proposals for their own home-domiciled students. In Wales two further distinctive aspects of the policy response can be noted. First, the expected income from English-domiciled students attending Welsh universities and paying the higher level of fees creates an increased income flow for Welsh HE which helps underpin the WAG's policy with respect to Welsh-domiciled students. Second, the Minister has indicated that he intends to use the power over approving tuition fee plans to drive wider change and reconfiguration in Welsh HE (WAG 2010).

Scotland is the UK country in which there is least evidence of any movement towards convergence on this issue at the time of writing, although the approach of charging fees to UK students who are not Scottish-domiciled will continue. The timing of the English policy changes, in the run-up to the May 2011 Scottish Parliament elections, made it more likely that the SNP government would re-affirm its opposition to fees or graduate contributions. It also precipitated a change of policy by the Scottish Labour Party, which had previously supported a graduate contribution, and encouraged the Scottish Liberal Democrats to maintain their existing opposition to fees. However, these positions are ostensibly based on optimistic financial assumptions which have been sharply criticised by Universities Scotland, the representative body of University Principals. The report of the technical working group, on which the Scottish Government was represented, also presents less optimistic scenarios for the future of the funding gap (Scottish Government 2011a). In the period prior to and during the Green Paper consultation the concept of some form of graduate contribution appeared to be gaining wider acceptance; it was supported by the Scottish Labour Party, Universities Scotland, Sir Andrew Cubie (the author of the 2000 report which led to the abolition of up-front fees) and even the Scottish branch of the National Union of Students, provided it was linked to enhanced student support and a progressive repayment system. However it was agreed that the state should continue to bear a major cost of funding HE, and there was little support for the market-led approach of the UK Coalition (Scottish Government 2011b). Given these circumstances, and the pressures on public funding in the UK, it seems unlikely that the debate over a sustainable funding system for HE in Scotland has been concluded.

There have also been significant differences across the home countries with respect to fees and student support for part-time students, although again some measure of convergence can be observed. The need to rectify the anomalies associated with the lack of financial support for part-time students has been recognised as an issue throughout the UK for many years. In 2004/05 Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) were reintroduced in Scotland as a means of providing support for part-time learners, and £500 per annum was made available for part-time HE students with an income of less than £18,000 per annum. In Wales the

Graham Review was established to consider effective ways of providing support for part-time students. It recommended capping fees at a *pro rata* rate of £1200 for full-time students, and while these recommendations were not implemented a fee grant and course grant were introduced for part-time students. However, following the Browne Review part-time students in England will be treated on the same basis as full-time students (BIS 2011), and will pay fees after graduation if their income exceeds £21,000. This proposal for funding part-time HE has also been adopted in Wales. At the time of writing there is no indication of how the administrations in Scotland and Northern Ireland will respond to the issue of funding for part-time students.

Thus, with respect to student fees and support we find evidence of divergence reflecting different values and priorities in the devolved administrations, which have been less supportive of high fees and a market-driven system than successive administrations in England. However, especially in Wales and Northern Ireland this divergence has been constrained by the limits to devolved powers and by the shared situational logics and interdependence of the UK systems; as a result policies have often moved in parallel if not converged. In Scotland there is more evidence of divergence but pressures for convergence have not, we suggest, been neutralised. In all systems governments have used policies for student fees and support to drive other policy goals such as widening participation or institutional reconfiguration. We now turn to these other policy areas.

## **2.2 Widening participation**

The second area of consideration is widening participation, which has been a priority for all the UK countries both before and after devolution. While the details of the strategies pursued differ between the four countries, there are also considerable similarities. However, the different approaches to student fees discussed above have led to some important differences in national systems to support widening participation.

Following the introduction of variable fees in England, there was a concern to ensure that students from lower income families were not excluded or discouraged from entering HE because of the costs involved. This concern to ensure 'fair access' led to the establishment of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the requirement for all universities to submit an access agreement to OFFA and complete an annual monitoring return. These access agreements must specify the plans for bursaries and other forms of financial support for students from low income families, and any forms of outreach activity which will be undertaken. Similar arrangements exist in Wales, where the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) requires each institution to submit a Fee Plan for approval. In Northern Ireland there have also been arrangements to provide additional financial support for students from lower income families, but these

have been national schemes, rather than institutional level ones. Under the UK Coalition Government proposals following the Browne Report, there is provision for both grants and an element of fee support for students from low income families in England. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills in its letter of guidance to the Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE) has also continued to emphasise fair access and widening participation, and the requirement for institutions to submit an annual Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) (BIS 2010). Given that no fees have been charged in Scotland, there are no arrangements of this kind. In this respect it can be seen that the introduction of variable fees has led to a greater policy emphasis on ensuring an explicit commitment to widening participation and fair access at an institutional level in England and Wales than in Scotland, and this emphasis will even increase as a result of the greater emphasis on the need for approval of fee plans in both England and Wales. While the arrangements are different in NI, they also reflect a greater emphasis on financial support for students from low income families.

While Scotland differs from the other UK countries in these respects, it does share in a UK-wide initiative - Supporting Professionalism in Admissions - which was established in 2006 to support admissions staff in developing and sharing good practice, particularly with regard to widening access. An important area of work has been around the issue of 'contextualised admissions', which enables staff to take into account wider contextual factors when comparing applicants' levels of attainment.

If we review other widening participation policies at national level we find that, although programmes have varied widely in their detailed arrangements, they have often pursued similar strategies. One such strategy is the provision of funding premia to institutions to support work associated with widening participation. These premia have been based on numbers of students from areas of social deprivation, and although the precise means of calculating them may vary the general approach has been similar. In England HEFCE has provided separate support both for widening access activities and for work to support retention; the combined funding for 2010-11 was £371.5m (including £13m to support disabled students). In Scotland the general widening access premium was discontinued in 2006, as the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) could find little evidence that it had had any demonstrable effect. It was replaced by a Widening Access and Retention Premium (WARP), which funded institutions to provide additional support for students who might be more likely to withdraw or fail to progress. The 2010-11 funding level was £10.4m. An additional £2.6m was provided to support work with disabled students. In Wales a Widening Access Premium has been provided to cover the extra costs associated with recruiting and retaining students from under-represented groups. This has been focused around the Communities First initiative, which has identified target areas with high levels of deprivation. In 2010-11 this funding stood at £5.6m with an additional £0.88m for disabled students (HEFCW 2009)

Secondly, all the home countries have encouraged regional collaboration and partnerships between universities, colleges and schools to widen access to HE. This is being achieved through the Aimhigher programme in England, the 'Learning for All' action plan in Scotland, and the 'Reaching Wider' programme in Wales; Northern Ireland has also established a framework for regional partnerships.

The role of FE colleges in promoting access to HE has also been recognised in all four countries, although again the precise arrangements differ (Parry 2009). In Scotland colleges play this role through their delivery of Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds) (Raab and Small 2003; Gallacher 2009), and the SFC has established regional 'hubs' to promote articulation from colleges to universities (SFC 2008). In England this has taken the form of Lifelong Learning Networks (HEFCE 2007), while in Wales the collaborative activity associated with the Universities Heads of the Valleys Institute has been quoted as an example of the kind of 'co-ordinated and collaborative approach' which should be followed (WAG 2009). HEFCW has also launched a regional strategy for the planning and delivery of HE involving co-operation between universities and colleges (HEFCW 2010a)

Associated with these initiatives to improve pathways to HE, credit and qualification frameworks have been established throughout the UK. Many credit developments in UK HE have their origins in the UK-wide CNAA, which awarded degrees in the non-university sector before the binary system was abolished in 1992. In the late 1990s Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales began to develop national frameworks which not only incorporated credit into a levels framework but also covered levels below HE. The pioneering Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System has been absorbed into later developments, but the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales, launched in 2001 and 2003 respectively, continue as comprehensive credit and qualifications frameworks covering HE and all other levels of learning. England had separate qualifications frameworks for HE and for other levels of learning, and its HE framework was not based on credit. However, there were numerous credit arrangements at a regional level within England, and in 2008 England followed Scotland and Wales by publishing its first national HE Credit Framework (Bridges 2010a). The home countries' frameworks share 'the same basis for the award of credit, the same credit currency and a very similar array of levels.... [T]hey belong to a common credit system' (Bridges 2010b, 21-2).

A further common theme has been an increasing emphasis on establishing targets and monitoring. This can be observed in England, where, from 2009, all institutions have been required to submit a Widening Participation Strategic Assessment to HEFCE and annual monitoring procedures have been established alongside this initiative. WARP in Scotland was subject to a further review during

2010-11; at the time of writing it is now in the process of being replaced by a series of more focused agreements with individual institutions. In Wales HEFCW has established targets as part of its *For Our Future* strategy (HEFCW 2010).

Widening participation has thus continued to be a major theme of policy in all four UK countries. While the details of the initiatives differ, there are also considerable similarities; most differences reflect programme divergence, the weaving of common policy strands into distinct agendas or programmes, rather than divergence on matters of principle or strategy (Gunning and Raffe 2011). Convergence, or at least similarities in policy, appear to have been driven by shared values and priorities, by the interconnections between policy communities (which have supported mutual learning and policy borrowing) and by the interdependence of the four systems (notably with respect to credit). The most significant aspects of divergence have been a consequence of the diverging student fee regimes, described above. England's greater enthusiasm for the 'market' has gone along with a greater emphasis on widening participation policies at an institutional level, and a higher level of funding at a national level. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland fee increases have been linked with a greater emphasis on widening access and student support. There are similar or even convergent trends across all UK countries in respect of regional collaboration, the development of credit frameworks and the setting of targets for institutions. Developments in this area have therefore been complex, involving elements of similarities, convergence and divergence.

### **2.3 Supporting research**

While the assessment of research has been undertaken on a UK-wide basis through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), and now through the Research Excellence Framework (REF), there have been significant differences in how the RAE results have been used to allocate funding for research, and how research has been supported. However we can again see signs of convergence.

England initially had the strongest focus on concentrating funding to support research excellence, in that most funding was provided for departments with a grading of 5 or 5\* in the 2001 RAE. Wales provided a higher level of funding for departments with a 4 grading, while Scotland also provided funding for those graded 3a and above. Following the 2008 RAE, in which the highest grade was 4\* for work of outstanding international excellence, there has been a move in all four UK countries towards greater concentration of funding in departments or centres with a high proportion of 4\* rated work.

The initial differences in approaches to funding in Scotland and Wales reflected a desire to support and foster research excellence across a wider range of departments and institutions and avoid a narrower concentration in a more limited number of research-led universities. In Scotland the SFC's 'pooling'

initiative encouraged institutions to work together jointly to obtain funding, undertake research and provide postgraduate training. This built on the advantages of geographical proximity and a fairly small-scale society where informal relationships often existed already and were easy to maintain. The SFC also provided Strategic Development Grants to help develop research infrastructure in discipline areas which were agreed to be priority areas for development. In Wales, too, there has been an emphasis on encouraging reconfiguration and collaboration to strengthen the university sector, and a significant level of funding has been provided for this (HEFCW 2011). This policy aimed to establish networks of excellence and strengthen the research base within a country where Cardiff receives more than half of the research funding from HEFCW and has a much stronger research base than any of the others (Fitz 2007). In Northern Ireland additional support was provided from 2001-2008 through the Support Programme for University Research. This was a 50:50 partnership between the DEL and Atlantic Philanthropies, a US-based charity (Osborne 2007).

The cuts in public spending have caused concerns regarding the need to protect world class research, particularly within the STEM subject areas. While the UK coalition government has indicated that it wishes to maintain funding levels for the research base, it has also indicated that this should be focused on 'internationally excellent' research (BIS 2010). The SFC Funding letter issued in December 2010 also indicated that research funding would be protected, but would be refocused 'to protect in real terms funding for the very highest rated research...' (SFC 2010).

Thus, initial policy divergence in research support, reflecting the different situational logics posed by each home countries' institutional arrangements for HE, has given way to convergence forced by the shared situational logics of public spending cuts.

#### **2.4 The HE contribution to economic development, skills and employability**

The fourth area concerns the contribution of HE to economic development, and to the development of skills and the employability of learners. In all four countries of the UK the link between HE and the economy has been a major driving force of policy, even where other objectives are recognised. For example the WAG's (2009) HE strategy document presented delivering social justice and supporting a buoyant economy as the two 'fundamental' priorities to which HE is expected to contribute. There are several strands to the ways in which HE is expected to make this contribution.



The first is the expectation that HE institutions contribute to knowledge transfer or knowledge exchange. HEFCE's Third Strand Funding aimed to foster a culture of knowledge transfer and exchange in universities (HEFCE 2009). In Scotland the SFC re-shaped its knowledge transfer funding to ensure that it has greater impact on key economic objectives (SFC 2009a). HEFCW has been encouraged to pursue similar objectives by the WAG (WAG 2009).

The second major strand is around employability and workforce development. In all of the UK countries measures to develop capacities which enhance employability have become a major priority for HE. In Scotland this has been within the framework of the SFC's Learning to Work strategy (SFC 2009b). In England HEFCE requires all universities to produce Employability Statements (HEFCE 2010). In Wales employability has been identified as a key outcome from HE (WAG 2009) and all universities are required to publish employability statements. Associated with this there has been an increasing emphasis on workforce development, although the details of these initiatives differ between the various UK countries.

In England the Lifelong Learning Networks, which have been mentioned above as part of the widening access strategy, have also been seen as a key means of establishing new relationships between universities, colleges and employers. More recently HEFCE has also established a workforce development programme to encourage more joint design and delivery of HE level courses with employers, and to provide new opportunities for learners to be placed in the workplace. SFC has been encouraging similar initiatives with its Learning to Work programme (SFC 2009b). In Wales there has been an increased emphasis on encouraging flexibility in programmes, and on the provision of part-time learning opportunities. The GO Wales initiative has been established to assist students and graduates in obtaining work placements and employment (<http://www.gowales.co.uk>).

An important difference in the ways in which this agenda has been addressed has been with respect to the development of vocationally focused programmes to meet the needs of occupations at the intermediate (associate professional and technical) level. In response to a perceived skills deficit at this level Foundation Degrees (FDs) were introduced in England in 2001 as an alternative to HNC/Ds. The policy documents which provided the framework for FDs placed more emphasis on employer involvement and work-based learning (QAA 2004). While this initiative was driven by the UK government, FDs were also introduced in Wales and Northern Ireland, and the WAG has more recently developed a strategy for their development in Wales as a key element in delivering employment focused, flexible programmes (WAG 2009). In Scotland the introduction of FDs has been resisted. It has been argued that HNC/Ds, developed and validated under the auspices of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), continue to provide vocationally relevant qualifications, and have enjoyed support from employers, students, colleges and the Government.

As a result the policy framework for such programmes differs in Scotland from other parts of the UK, with less emphasis on the direct involvement of employers in the development and delivery of these programmes, and less emphasis on a requirement for work-based learning. However, in practice the extent of divergence is limited. Securing employer involvement is difficult throughout the UK, and differences between occupational sectors have an important mediating effect. Thus in sectors such as early years education, where there has been a strong tradition of training through work-based placements, employer involvement is high in Scotland, as well as elsewhere in the UK, while in other sectors such as computing it is much more difficult to achieve this involvement in all parts of the UK (Reeve et al. 2007).

Skills strategy is another area where initial divergence has been followed by elements of convergence. The Scottish Government's (2007) Skills Strategy presented a rather different analysis of the issues and the appropriate responses to that of the UK-wide Leitch Report (2006). It placed less emphasis than Leitch on the supply of skills as a driver of economic development, and more emphasis on the need for measures to stimulate the demand for, and utilisation of, higher-level skills. However, the Scottish Government has had few policy levers with which to support its strategy, so the practical effect of this divergence has been limited. Moreover, there are signs that the same analysis is becoming more widely accepted across the UK, not least due to the influence of the UK Commission on Employment and Skills (Keep et al. 2010). A new skills strategy for Wales, launched in 2008, emphasised the need to strengthen the voice of the employers and be responsive to their needs and to the strategic needs of the Welsh economy, themes which can also be observed in other parts of the UK (WAG 2008). In Northern Ireland the review of the skills strategy has resulted in an increased emphasis on colleges and HE institutions working with employers to provide opportunities for people in work to up-skill, and to contribute to the development of a knowledge-based economy (DELNI 2010).

Thus, although there are instances of divergent or different policies for economic development, skills and employability, the extent of divergence has been limited and there are considerable similarities in the four administrations' policies and even signs of recent convergence in such areas as skills policy. These can be attributed to shared policy goals, to shared or overlapping policy communities and discourses, to the devolved administrations' limited powers over economic matters and to the similar situational logics of programme delivery (as in the case of FDs). We also note the overlap with widening participation policies, for example in respect of FDs and local networks.

### **3. SOURCES OF DIVERGENCE OR CONVERGENCE**

In each of these four areas there has been a mixture of divergent and convergent trends. In respect of student fees and support, where policies diverged soonest

after devolution, there are still two large policy divides. One is between the market-led approach (with very high fees) in England and the rejection of this approach by the other three countries. The second policy divide is between Scotland, which has rejected any form of fee or graduate contribution, and England, Wales and (probably) Northern Ireland, whose policies reflect partial convergence towards the principles that HE should be free at the point of entry, that graduates should contribute to the cost and that their contributions should be related to their ability to pay. However, towards the end of 2010 opinion in Scotland also appeared to be converging towards these principles, and we have suggested that the current Scottish policy may not be sustainable in the longer term, making some re-convergence likely. It is also notable that Wales and Northern Ireland have felt the need to copy many features of the English fees policy despite their rejection of its underlying market strategy. All the administrations recognise the need for greater equity for part-time students, although this is not yet fully reflected in concrete measures. Different approaches to student funding are reflected in different strategies for supporting access by less advantaged students, but all administrations employ a similar battery of measures to promote widening participation, and there are signs of possible convergence with respect to institutional target-setting and monitoring and the development of credit frameworks. There is evidence of convergence in research policies, as English policy is no longer distinctive for its greater emphasis on selectivity. Each administration is employing a similar battery of measures to promote employability and to maximise the contribution of HE to economic competitiveness. And even when these measures reflect different philosophies, as in the case of Foundation Degrees and HNC/HNDs, the practical circumstances of implementation have led to important similarities in practice.

Rather than a long-term 'divergence machine', parliamentary devolution seems to have introduced a fluctuating and complex pattern in which the balance of divergence and convergence has varied over time, across specific policy issues and according to the particular countries that are compared. And across large areas of policy the more important trend is the continued similarity of policies, despite differences of detail, and the constraints on divergence.

We now return to the five factors or sources of divergence discussed earlier and summarised in Figure 1. For each factor, what does our review of HE policy trends say about the balance of divergent and convergent influences?

The first factor, the formal redistribution of powers, led to the devolved administrations introducing policies that would not otherwise have been adopted, such as the abolition of up-front fees in Scotland. It also allowed them to choose whether or not to follow English policy initiatives, as in the Welsh response to successive fee increases in England. It therefore facilitated a measure of policy divergence, although this was constrained by the extent to which power has been retained at the UK level. The Welsh Assembly could not implement all the decisions of the first Rees Review because legislative powers, and executive

powers over student finance, were retained at the UK level (the Assembly's powers have since been increased). The Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended for nearly half of the first decade of devolution, during which time its powers reverted to the UK government. All home countries are subject to UK government policy in a range of reserved areas which affect HE, including the economy, employment, immigration, science and equalities legislation. As a result, the devolved governments have limited control over the means to achieve such policy goals as stimulating skill utilisation or using overseas students to enhance the skills base. Perhaps most importantly, fiscal policy has not been devolved and changes in the devolved administrations' budgets are based on English policies. When England shifted the balance of cost-sharing from taxpayers towards students or graduates, thereby reducing public spending, the budgets for the other countries fell commensurately, even if they favoured a different pattern of cost-sharing. They had the option to maintain existing spending on HE, but only by making larger cuts elsewhere in their budgets. In principle the Scottish government could vary the standard rate of income tax by up to three percentage points, and thereby increase its budget, but this option was politically unattractive and was allowed to lapse by the 2007-11 administration. (The Scotland Bill currently before the UK Parliament would extend this power, and following the clear majority which the SNP achieved in the 2011 Scottish election, there is renewed interest in obtaining and using enhanced powers)

Even when they have the necessary powers have the devolved governments had the desire to develop divergent policies? This may depend on the second factor claimed to support divergence: differences in values, ideologies and discourses. Recent HE policy developments seem to reflect such differences. The UK government has adopted a market-led approach for England, whereas Scottish and Welsh policies appear to have reflected more 'social-democratic' values of social inclusion and public provision. For example, the ministerial foreword to the Scottish Green Paper claimed that the English approach 'contradicts our longstanding belief in the commonweal, and fatally undermines the social contract that citizens in Scotland have with the state' (Scottish Government 2010, ii).

However, we should not exaggerate the differences in values and ideologies. Away from these well-publicised differences over funding, the similarities are much more apparent. A comparative review of lifelong learning policies across the UK found little evidence of the differences described by some commentators (Byrne and Raffe 2005). HE policy in all four administrations has been strongly driven by the perceived needs of the knowledge economy and employability. The key policy texts reflect a discourse that is UK-wide and, to a significant extent, global. Policies for widening participation and employability similarly reflect UK-wide or global discourses; as we have seen the 'widening participation' discourse may even be stronger in 'neo-liberal' England than in 'social democratic' Scotland and Wales. Moreover, there are common values and discourses implicit in

concepts such as 'world class institutions', which the devolved administrations have been keen to embrace, and in the criteria for assessing research quality which are applied across the UK. International league tables – influential because of the UK's relatively high performance – are a further source of value-uniformity.

Nor is it evident that different HE policies reflect large differences in *public* values and ideologies. Social attitudes are broadly similar across the four territories on many aspects of public policy, including the role of choice and the market (Jeffrey 2006, Curtice and Heath 2009). Scots are more likely to support comprehensive principles for secondary education, but there are fewer such differences in views on HE, and attitudes to tuition fees in particular have been similar in Scotland and England (Bromley and Curtice 2003, Jeffrey 2006b, Curtice and Heath 2009). Tuition fees have been election issues in England as well as in Scotland and Wales; they remain controversial in all parts of the UK and have been a source of strain within the UK Coalition government. Paterson (2003b) describes stronger support for HE's civic role among academics in Scotland than in England, but the differences are relatively small. To the extent that values, ideologies and discourses are a source of policy divergence, therefore, this may largely reflect the different ways in which they are mediated by the political system, for example the effects of different electoral systems, power-sharing arrangements, party political alignments and policy elites. The hardening of parties' positions on student fees in the run-up to the 2011 Scottish election may be an example of this. Public values, ideologies and discourses vary rather little across the home countries and are as likely to be a source of convergence, or continuing similarity in policies, as divergence.

The role of values and ideologies as a potential factor generating divergence is therefore closely connected to the third such factor, namely the different backgrounds, interests, composition, cohesion and styles of the HE policy community in each country. These differences clearly affect the ways that policy is made. The leadership of Scottish HE has had a policy influence unrivalled in England (or indeed in Wales), exemplified by the 2008 Joint Task Force in which university leaders agreed a common strategy with the Scottish government, by the Tripartite Advisory Group which continues some of the Task Force's functions, and by the joint technical working group set up in 2010-11 to examine funding issues. Another example is the SCQF, which was led by HE and avoided challenging universities' interests as similar frameworks had done in other countries (Raffe 2003). However, the SCQF was not a product of parliamentary devolution: it was proposed in 1999 and built on developments during the 1980s and 1990s. Strong education policy communities in Scotland, and to a lesser extent Wales, are a legacy of administrative devolution, which enabled professional and policy communities to develop with relatively little political oversight (Greer and Jarman 2008, Keating 2009). Rees (2007, 2011) argues that the continuity of Welsh policy communities before and after parliamentary devolution helps to explain why it did not lead to more change in policy. In summary, policy communities in Scotland and Wales have mainly been a source

of continuity; this has only involved divergence when this has meant not following England in new directions.

Moreover policy communities, like policy discourses, may be UK-wide or global, and therefore a possible source of convergence. To a much greater degree than in other sectors of education the academic community is organised on a UK basis, or internationally, with significant mobility across borders. Bodies such as Universities UK and the National Union of Students operate on a UK-wide basis, albeit with Scottish branches, as do many HE policy researchers and communities of practice in such areas as credit. The preparation and publication of statistics on a UK-wide basis means that each country's performance is benchmarked against the others. And although contacts between policy-makers in the four governments have been informal and intermittent (Trench 2008b), there is significant informal mutual learning even when formal coordination is limited. This is reflected in similar policies for widening participation, research funding, employability and economic development,

The fourth factor claimed to promote divergence is the alleged variation in the situational logic of policy-making across the UK territories. To the extent (for example) that policies for employability and skills are tailored to the needs of different economies and labour markets, or widening participation policies are designed for different social contexts, we may expect policies to diverge accordingly. The initial divergence in research policy reflected the need for different measures to achieve 'critical mass' in a large and diverse system such as England compared with a small system such as Northern Ireland, or one such as Wales where one institution has received more than half the research funding. The emphasis on collaboration and re-configuration in post-devolution Welsh policy has reflected the distinctive institutional structure of HE in Wales. The Scottish approach to access, transfer and progression has been influenced by the distinctive role of colleges in Scottish HE; and so on.

However, the administrative devolution that preceded parliamentary devolution was developed precisely to allow policies to be differentiated in response to these different situational logics (that was, at least, its declared purpose). 'Scottish solutions to Scottish problems' were politically acceptable within a unitary UK. Consequently, the different circumstances and challenges of HE in the four territories are more likely to result in policy continuity - the persistence of already existing policy differences - than divergence. Moreover, the situational logics have not, in practice, been very different across the four systems. Social and economic contexts are broadly similar, and the UK labour market and professional bodies exercise a powerful homogenising influence. The four governments face similar policy issues. They must address challenges raised by the quantitative and qualitative 'massification' of HE: how to pay for the increased numbers of students, how to attract a wider range of students, what pattern of institutional differentiation is needed, how to meet the more diverse demands and expectations on universities, how to realise their civic potential, and so on. To a

large extent these challenges are not just UK-wide, but global (Johnstone 2006, Altbach 2007). The need to cut public spending creates a new logic which may encourage further convergence, if it requires resources to be concentrated on core functions which vary less across systems. In the first decade of parliamentary devolution divergent policies and spending priorities were facilitated by rising budgets (Jeffery 2007); cuts may have the opposite effect (Rees 2011).

The fifth factor discussed earlier is the degree of mutual independence of the HE systems and, consequently, of HE policy decisions. To what extent does the interdependence of the four UK systems constrain divergence and encourage policy convergence?

As with the other four factors the evidence is mixed. It seems unlikely, for example, that each home country's policy options for widening participation are directly constrained by the decisions of the other governments. However, when we consider policies regarding research or employability, and more especially when we examine student fees and funding, the interdependence of the UK systems appears more constraining. This interdependence is reflected in the flows of students and staff between the different territories, and in a graduate labour market which is organised on a UK and often international level. It is further reflected in the four administrations' shared interest in a UK basis for such functions as student admissions, research assessment, research funding, peer review and many aspects of quality assurance. The devolved administrations recognise this interest: it is significant that none of them has sought to take over the role of the UK Research Councils. They also recognise a common interest in a UK 'brand' to attract overseas students.

Given the unequal size of the four systems this interdependence means that English policies continue to define the agendas to which the others must respond. Wales and Northern Ireland are most affected. More than 40 per cent of UK-domiciled full-time undergraduates in Welsh institutions are from other parts of the UK, and more than 30 per cent of Welsh full-time undergraduates study elsewhere in the UK (Ramsden 2010). If a fee increase in England were not matched by an equivalent increase in Wales, and encouraged even a small proportion of English students to switch their applications to Welsh rather than English institutions, the impact on opportunities for Welsh students, and on the institutions themselves, could be severe (Rees Review 2005). The opposite problem arose in the past when England introduced incentive payments to encourage teacher trainees in shortage subjects; Wales did not have the same shortages but had to introduce similar payments to protect against a flood of prospective teachers to England. All three devolved administrations plan to minimise the impact of the English increase in tuition fees in 2012 by charging higher *de facto* fees for students from other parts of the UK than for their own domiciled students, thereby deterring a flood of English 'fee refugees'.

The interdependence of the four HE systems, and the dominant position of England, are reflected in the way that the size and trend in the 'funding gap' have dominated policy debates in the devolved administrations. The funding gap is defined in relation to England and reflects the assumption that funding levels need to be similar throughout the UK because of the shared dependence on markets for students, staff and research funding.

The five factors summarised in Figure 1 are therefore associated with constraints which limit divergence, or even encourage convergence, as well as with pressures for divergence. The forces which bind the UK's HE systems and keep them on a common path are at least as strong as the forces which divide them. Parliamentary devolution has changed the field over which these forces meet and interact, but it may not have significantly changed the outcome. The future is open, but we anticipate as much convergence as divergence in HE policy for the countries of the UK.

## NOTES

1. The Northern Ireland Assembly was first elected in 1998 but suspended until November 1999. It was suspended again for a few months during 2000 and from 2002-07. The earlier Stormont Parliament which met from 1921-1972 had also had devolved responsibilities for education and training.
2. The seminars had contributions from England, Scotland, Wales and other countries including Australia, Germany and the US. Papers can be seen at <http://www.crl.org.uk/about/events/massheinukandinternationalcontexts/#d.en.20146>.

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Figure 1: factors promoting divergence and convergence

<b>Research focus</b>	<b><i>Devolution (UK)</i></b>	<b><i>Internationalisation (HE)</i></b>
<b>Framing question</b>	Divergence	Convergence
<b>Factors</b>		
<i>Policy process:</i>		
<b><i>Formal redistribution of power</i></b>	Downwards, towards devolved governments	Upwards, towards supra-national organisations
<b><i>Values, ideologies and discourses</i></b>	Reflect national educational traditions & political cultures	Reflect global policy discourses
<b><i>Policy communities</i></b>	Different composition, interests and policy styles	Connected, part of global epistemic community
<i>Situational logic of policy:</i>		
<b><i>Policy contexts and challenges</i></b>	Reflect different national histories, institutions and circumstances	Reflect common global trends and pressures
<b><i>Interdependence of policy decisions</i></b>	Limited	Strong