



FE and skills across the four countries of the UK

New opportunities for policy learning

Ann Hodgson, Ken Spours and Martyn Waring
UCL Institute of Education

Jim Gallacher, *Glasgow Caledonian University*

Tracy Irwin, *Ulster University*

David James, *Cardiff University*

Foreword

International comparison is a hugely powerful tool in policy making when it is used in the right way – learning from and contextualising effective elements rather than seeking to simply transplant programmes from one setting to another.

When visitors from overseas come to look at the ‘UK education system’ one of the first things we have to say is that there is no single system. Education, FE and skills are areas of devolved responsibility and have developed very differently in each of the four nations. That can present challenges of coherence, for instance where an employer seeks to train apprentices in more than one nation within the UK, or a training provider wants to operate across boundaries.

It also presents a unique opportunity. As with federal nations such as the US and Australia, it provides us with a potential laboratory to test and improve our education policies. Four nations share many characteristics of labour market, organisation and culture and yet are pursuing sometimes very different approaches, with a variety of outcomes.

With such a fascinating range of policies and lessons on our doorsteps, we felt that it was essential that we took the time to understand the FE and skills systems across the UK – to compare, contrast and draw out emerging practice.

We are very grateful to the team at UCL’s Institute of Education and the country experts for organising a fascinating series of seminars culminating in this report.

However, we don’t want this to be the end of the story. We want it to be a step towards closer ongoing collaboration and practice sharing between the nations so that we can continue to develop the most effective and suitable policies for each of our contexts. We look forward to working with colleagues across the UK to achieve this.

OLLY NEWTON, Director of Policy and Research, Edge Foundation

JENNIFER COUPLAND, Director of Professional and Technical Education, DfE

HELEN BREADY, Manager Policy & Stakeholder Nations, City and Guilds





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Section 1 | Introduction

Background to the inquiry

The Project began from the premise that, while national governments in the UK have actively looked to international examples when devising further education (FE) and skills policy, much less use has been made of cross-UK comparisons. This has been the case even though England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland possess a broadly common labour market, students travel across borders for employment and higher education and three of the countries (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) share qualifications. While each nation's culture, social and political lives have diverged to some extent since democratic devolution in the late 1990s, this Project took the view that the UK might still provide a useful 'laboratory' for policy learning in the area of FE and skills.

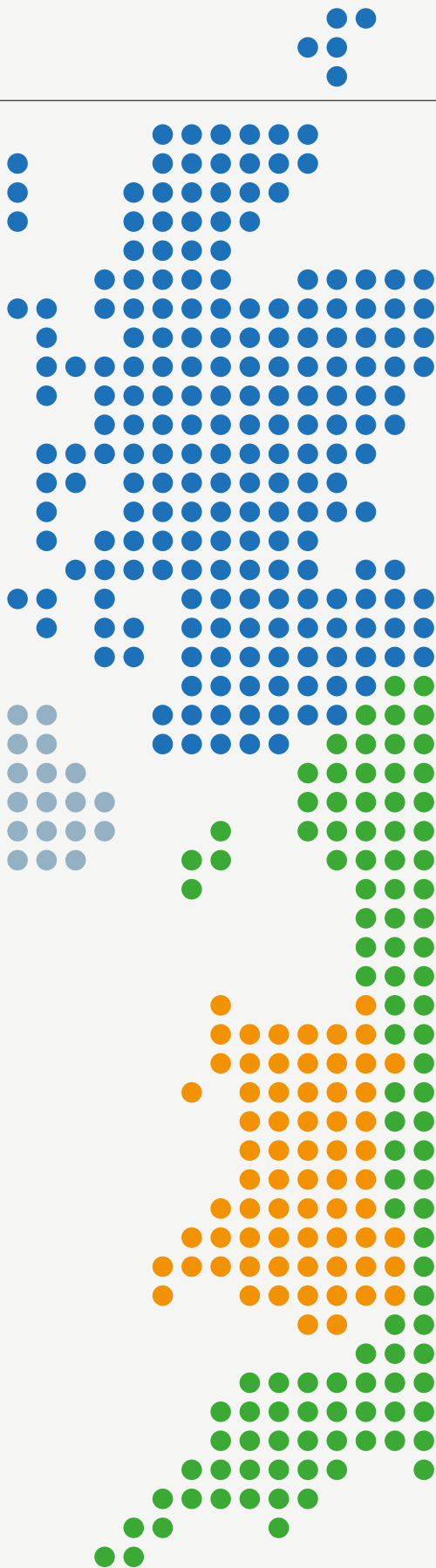
There has, of course, been research on different aspects of policy across the four countries of the UK, but nothing has been undertaken recently in relation to FE and skills, despite major changes that have been taking place across all parts of the UK. These include regionalisation of FE colleges in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and area-based reviews in England; a new apprenticeship model in England and the UK-wide apprenticeship levy; moves towards a post-16 tertiary approach in Scotland and Wales; different ways of funding FE and HE; and reforms to technical education in England contained within the Post-16 Skills plan. Knowledge about the approaches being taken in each of the four countries and the assumptions and principles that underpin them is under-researched despite their importance. This appeared to be a territory ripe for research that would be valuable for researchers, policy-makers and practitioners now and in the future. Moreover, this type of cross-national comparison was seen as particularly important in the context of Brexit with the increased emphasis on developing competitive, high value-added enterprises and an appropriately educated and skilled UK workforce.

The inquiry

The Edge Foundation, the Department for Education in England and City and Guilds were farsighted enough to fund and actively participate in an Inquiry entitled, 'Policy and policy learning across the four countries of the UK: the case of further education and skills'. The Inquiry was directed by Professors Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours from UCL Institute of Education assisted by rapporteur and research associate Martyn Waring, with the support of three country experts – Professor Jim Gallacher from Glasgow Caledonian University (Scotland), Professor David James from Cardiff University (Wales), Dr Tracy Irwin, from the University of Ulster (Northern Ireland) – and a Special Adviser, Professor Ewart Keep from Oxford University. The Inquiry took the form of six seminars between September 2017 and May 2018, one in each of the four countries – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – with a specific focus on that country's FE and skills policy and practice, and a further two held in London, but with a UK-wide focus, to begin and conclude the programme. An additional seminar was held in Jersey (a Crown Dependency) which has its own education system that is related to but independent of the UK, because of a mutual interest in the ideas being discussed.

The series as a whole, which involved a broad mix of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners, was framed around a central research question:

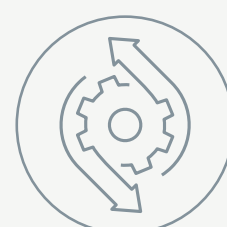
What can be learnt in terms of new knowledge and practical application from a comparison between FE and skills policy in the four countries of the UK?



The report

This report provides a summary of some of the key ideas that were discussed during the Inquiry. More detailed information, including presentations, background papers and a Briefing Paper from each of the seminars, can be found at: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-centres/centres/centre-for-post14-education-and-work/projects/fe-skills-four-countries-uk>

The report begins with a short discussion of the conceptual ideas that lay behind the seminar series. It continues by providing brief, factual profiles of the context for FE and skills in England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland. This is followed by a series of vignettes depicting 'interesting practice' in the five jurisdictions and a section on common challenges across the UK and where policy learning might take place. The report concludes with some ideas about next steps for building on the seminar series to keep the learning process alive. ■



Section 2 | Key concepts

Three key concepts underpinned and shaped the *FE and Skills Across the Four Countries of the UK* project: convergence/divergence; policy learning/policy borrowing and the idea of a UK-wide policy learning laboratory.

Convergence/divergence

Since democratic devolution in the 1990s (Scotland and Wales) and the 2000s (Northern Ireland), the four countries of the UK have been gradually developing their own, separate policies in relation to education and skills development. (Scotland has traditionally operated a distinctive education and training system that predates devolution.) One question that the project sought to examine, therefore, was the pattern of convergence and divergence from that period to the present – that is, the extent to which policies in this area have remained or become more similar (convergence) or more different (divergence), given that England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland share borders and labour markets. In examining this question, the seminar series also sought to identify and understand the effects of pressures for convergence or for divergence.

Policy borrowing/policy learning

The seminar series made a distinction between these two concepts. ‘Policy borrowing’ can broadly be defined as the act of identifying selective aspects of ‘excellent practice’ in one country and transferring it to another as a remedy for the latter country’s problem or weakness, without due consideration for the national contextual factors in either country. On the whole, ‘policy borrowing’ is the preserve of politicians wanting to gain performative advantage over other countries and is often undertaken at speed. ‘Policy learning’, on the other hand, might be described as the capacity of policy makers and other policy actors to use historical and international evidence to better understand their own national systems; to identify and discuss common problems and challenges to be collaboratively

investigated; and to develop modes of governance that improve the relationship between policy and practice. It is marked therefore by a slower more deliberative and participatory policy process that involves a range of policy actors – national, regional and local officials, researchers and practitioners.

A UK-wide policy learning laboratory?

While policy makers have often looked to cross-country comparisons when searching for answers to problems or seeking inspiration for future policy-making, cross-UK comparisons have only rarely been used for this purpose. Researchers have argued, on the other hand, that the four countries of the UK potentially provide a ‘natural laboratory’ where policy learning might take place because of the historical, political and socio-economic factors they share in common. One of the major drivers for the *FE and Skills Across the Four Countries of the UK* seminar series was the question of whether and to what extent the four countries still function as a UK-wide ‘policy laboratory’.

While a questioning approach was taken to all three concepts throughout the seminar series, the nature of the key research question suggested that policy learning between the four countries was both possible and desirable in the area of FE and skills. It was argued that ‘accelerated divergence’, most noticeable between 2010 and 2017 in the field of general/academic education, was perhaps now reverting, in the field of FE and skills at least, to more ‘managed divergence’ that characterised most of the ‘noughties’, the period in which the concept of the policy laboratory was first coined.

Section 5 of the report identifies some of the common FE and skills challenges the seminar series suggested that all four countries of the UK need to address as well as highlighting some areas where policy learning might take place. ■

Section 3 | Country profiles

**Background and context**

England is by far the largest country in the UK with a population of over 53 million. It has a dynamic economy and high levels of employment. However, this varies significantly within and across regions. London and the South East are the wealthiest and most economically active areas, whereas the coastal regions in many parts of the country suffer considerable social deprivation and unemployment. While there are many big companies that have their headquarters in England, again particularly in the large cities, as with the whole of the UK economy, England has a preponderance of small- and medium-sized businesses. These socio-economic conditions have an impact on educational achievement levels and progression into and within FE and skills, as well as on opportunities for employer-provider partnership working and high skilled employment.

FE and skills

Policy framework

The current Conservative Government has a strong focus on technical and vocational education, seeing it as an important part of its Industrial Strategy¹ and drive for higher levels of productivity. The referendum decision for Brexit has only increased the importance of this area, although austerity measures have meant a reduction in funding for FE and skills, in comparison with higher education and schools, because it is not a 'protected' area. Vocational qualifications have been under reform since the publication of the Wolf Review² in 2011, but a further much more radical overhaul is underway resulting from the independent Sainsbury Review³ and the Post-16 Skills Plan.⁴ The three main initiatives are: the introduction of new employer-led apprenticeship standards and an apprenticeship levy; the development of 15 new technical routes based on the new apprenticeship standards and certificated through T Levels for first delivery in 2020; and area-based reviews to reduce the number and increase the financial viability of further education colleges. Through the Careers Strategy,⁵ there has also been a recognition of the need for high quality Careers Education Information Advice and Guidance to ensure young people and adults find appropriate progression routes into work and further/higher education.

Governance arrangements

England, unlike Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, does not have its own assembly but is administered under the UK Parliament. FE and Skills comes under the Department for Education and is funded through the Education and Skills Funding Agency. However, from 2019 some of the Adult Education Budget will be devolved to a small number of Mayoral Combined Authorities (e.g. Greater Manchester) and the Greater London Authority (GLA) in London. The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspects FE and Skills providers under its Common Inspection Framework. The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) regulates qualifications, examinations and assessment. The Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA) has responsibility for the development of apprenticeships, and its role will be extended to include T Levels in 2019, when it will be



known as the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. England does not now have an independent curriculum body. Currently the IfA ensures high-quality apprenticeship standards and advises government on funding for each standard: it will continue to fulfil this function alongside its new duties. A number of awarding bodies (e.g. City and Guilds, Pearson) design, develop, deliver and award qualifications in the FE and skills sector.

Colleges

Colleges were incorporated in 1992 and are accountable to their governing bodies.⁶ There were 269 colleges in England in April 2018 with a combined total income of seven billion pounds in 2015/16, the vast majority of which was public funding:

- 181 general FE
- 62 sixth form colleges
- 14 land-based
- 10 specialist
- 2 art and design

Colleges educate 2.2 million people, the majority of whom are 19+ (1.4million) and employ 120,000 full-time equivalent staff of whom half are teachers. College provision is highly diverse. In addition to full-time and part-time academic and vocational courses for 16-18 year olds, this total includes, 313,000 on an apprenticeship through a college, 16,000 14-15 year olds on specialist pre-vocational provision and 151,000 studying higher education. One third of English students aged under 19 who enter higher education through UCAS studied at a college and colleges offer the majority of Higher National Certificates, Higher National Diplomas and Foundation Degrees.

In addition to colleges, in 2018 there were 490 publically funded independent training providers offering FE and Skills programmes.⁷

Apprenticeships

There are two types of apprenticeship programmes in England: frameworks and standards based. The former type is gradually being phased out as new standards are developed. In April 2017 an apprenticeship levy of 0.5% of the salary bill (minus £15,000 annually) was introduced for all employers with a salary bill of over three million. This pays for apprenticeship training and assessment for levy paying employers. Those who do not pay a levy have to fund 10 per cent of these costs, with the Government paying the rest.

The Government has a target of three million apprenticeships by 2020. In 2016/17 academic year there were 908,700 participating in apprenticeships in England, 9,300 more than the year before. However, there were only 494,900 starts, which is 14,500 less than the previous year: 45 per cent of these were aged 25+, 33 per cent were aged 19-24 and 21 per cent were under 19. Of all apprenticeships in 2016/17 academic year, 54 per cent were at Intermediate Level, 43 per cent at Advanced Level and seven per cent at Higher Level, with the majority overall in the service sectors. Older learners and those on Intermediate and Advanced level programmes thus predominate in apprenticeships. Women (51% of funded apprentices in 2016/17 academic year) outnumber men on apprenticeships and this has been the case since

2010/11. A total of 277,800 apprentices successfully completed an apprenticeship in 2016/17, up 6100 on the previous year.⁸

Working with employers

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

Area-Based Reviews (ABRs)

The processes of 'regionalisation' of FE colleges in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have been followed by ABRs in England. They were initiated in 2016 by the Conservative Government to create fewer and more viable college groupings in response to the impact of austerity policies on post-16 funding and financial difficulties in many colleges. ABRs were also expected to create closer relationships between colleges and employers in the context of the new standards-based apprenticeships and T Levels. The significance of ABRs for the challenges of policy learning in FE and skills across the UK is that they have resulted in a greater emphasis on institutional collaboration to develop college specialisms and to work with employers. This arguably brings the English FE sector, which is known for its competitive character, a little closer to the more collaborative system features of the other three countries of the UK. ■

FE and skills

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SCOTLAND

Background and context

Scotland is the second largest country in the UK, although with a population of around 5.4 million it is considerably smaller than England.

It has developed a relatively distinctive approach to vocational education and training and skills policy. The devolution settlement of 1999 established the Scottish Parliament, which is responsible for economic and skills policy. Since 2007 the government has been formed by the Scottish National Party (SNP). This has led to an emphasis on the importance of providing the conditions for ‘sustainable economic growth’, which has been associated with the SNP government’s focus on creating the context for making independence a realisable goal for Scotland. This has been set out in *Scotland’s Economic Strategy*⁹ in which six key growth sectors are identified: food and drink; creative industries; sustainable tourism; energy (including renewables); financial and business services; and life sciences.

FE and skills

Policy context

Scotland can be seen to have developed a more managed approach to education and training policy with a strong emphasis on government policy and planning, in contrast to the more autonomous and marketised approach which has emerged in England. The framework for skills development in Scotland was laid out in Skills for Scotland,¹⁰ in which two of the key ideas promulgated were simplifying skills systems and strengthening partnerships. These ideas have been reflected in later policy initiatives. The need for greater co-operation between the national agencies responsible for skills development has been further developed through the Enterprise and Skills Review.¹¹ This focuses on the need for closer co-operation between the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Skills Development Scotland (SDS), Scottish Enterprise (SE), and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE). (The responsibilities of these bodies are explained in more detail in the next sub-section, 'Governance arrangements'.) One outcome of this review has been the establishment of a Strategic Board which now oversees the work of all of these organisations.

A key aspect of recent policy has been a focus on youth employment. This led to the establishment of the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce under the chairmanship of Sir Ian Wood and to the Scottish Government's implementation plan – Developing the Young Workforce (DYW): Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy.¹² This outlines a seven-year strategy involving greater partnership working between schools, colleges, and employers. This strategy has also emphasised the idea of equality and fair access to employment. In more recent policy directives from the Scottish Government this emphasis on young people has been qualified by a recognition of the continuing needs of older learners for reskilling and upskilling, and the importance of part-time provision.

A second important theme which has emerged in Scottish policy has been an emphasis on the idea of the 'learner journey,' which has been developed in the Scottish Government's 15-24 Learner Journey Review that covered progress through the senior phase in schools (S4-S6),

further and higher education, vocational training and apprenticeships and entry into employment. The report from this review was published in May 2018 and will help shape future policy in this area.¹³

A concern to widen access to further and higher education has also been a major driver of policy in Scotland and this was given further momentum by the establishment of a Commission to Widen Access, which produced its final report in 2016.¹⁴ This includes a number of useful recommendations which are helping to shape policy in this area.

Governance arrangements

A number of national bodies are responsible for the funding and strategic direction of vocational education and training and skills policy in Scotland. The Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education (SFC) is responsible for funding all the universities and colleges in Scotland and provides strategic direction for the college and university sectors. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) is the national skills agency for Scotland. It is responsible for funding apprenticeship programmes,



and for the career guidance service. A Director of Skills Alignment has been appointed in 2018 to help coordinate the work of these two agencies. In addition, they both receive a Letter of Guidance from the Scottish Government each year which lays out the Government's priorities. Scottish Enterprise is the national agency with the role of encouraging economic development. There is a similar body for the Highlands and Islands area, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), while a new body for the South of Scotland is being established. The work of all of these agencies is now being coordinated through the Strategic Board established as an outcome from the Enterprise and Skills Review.

With respect to curriculum development and the awarding of qualifications, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is responsible for most qualifications in Scotland outside of the university sector. This includes Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) and Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds). Education Scotland is responsible for quality assurance in the college sector. There is also a national Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) which includes all Scottish qualifications.

Colleges

There has been a major programme of regionalisation for colleges. This has been designed to end unnecessary duplication and create a college structure which would more effectively meet the needs of learners and employers within the regions. The legislative framework for this new structure was provided by the Post 16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013. As a result of a merger process the number of colleges has been reduced from 43 to 27 in 13 regions. Most are now single college regions, but there are three multi-college regions (Glasgow, Lanarkshire, and the 10 colleges within the University of the Highlands and Islands). All regions now are required to agree a Regional Outcome Agreement (ROA) with the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) which specifies how they will meet the social and economic needs of the region, and funding is then provided on this basis (see the case study on ROAs in Section 4).

There are now around 240,000 students in Scotland's Colleges. There is a relatively high proportion of higher education level students (20%), and around 31 per cent are now studying full-time, up from 17 per cent in 2005-06.



FE and skills

As a result of Scottish Government policy, the percentage of young people aged 24 or under studying in colleges has risen from 44 per cent in 2005-06 to 58 per cent in 2015-16. Students are enrolled on a range of qualifications including: 20 per cent on HNC/Ds or HN modules; eight per cent on S/NVQs; 20 per cent on non-advanced certificates, diplomas or other qualifications; and 25 per cent on National qualifications, including Scottish Highers.

The SFC College Leavers Destination reports published over the last three years have provided evidence that the majority of full-time qualifiers (66%) progress to further study or training, mainly within the college sector or by progressing to a university, while only 17 per cent proceed directly to employment.¹⁵

Apprenticeships

The apprenticeship programme in Scotland is managed and funded through SDS which has an employer led Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB). There are now three types of apprenticeships in Scotland.

Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) are the main type of apprenticeship programme. There are more than 80 frameworks which have been developed by Sector Skills Councils. In 2016-7 there were more than 27,000 starts, 66 per cent of these were at Level 3, with 60 per cent in the 16-19 age group. The Scottish Government target is to have at least 30,000 starts per annum by 2020. While colleges are involved with the provision of MAs, only around eight per cent of starts involve direct contracts with colleges, although this figure may go up to around 20 per cent with sub-contracting of parts of the MA programmes to colleges. Independent Training Providers play the major role in the delivery of MAs.

Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs) were introduced in Scotland in 2014 as part of the Scottish Government's Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) programme. This aims to address the problem of youth unemployment in Scotland and ensure that young people are suitably prepared to enter the workforce successfully. One aspect of this programme is to extend the existing Modern Apprenticeship (MA) programme back into schools with



the formation of FAs which are two-year programmes available to pupils in the two senior years of secondary school (S5 & S6). The distinctive aspect of FAs is that pupils will attend college and/or have a work-based element as part of their programme. This is establishing new types of vocational training relationships between schools, colleges and employers. FAs are now available in every college region in Scotland, and the aim is to have 2600 starts by August 2018. The longer-term aim is to involve every school in Scotland by 2020.

The third type of apprenticeship programme is Graduate Apprenticeships. This programme is still in development. There are at present 11 frameworks, mainly at bachelor or master's level. The aim is to have 950 places available by September 2018. At present this mainly involves partnerships between employers and universities with limited involvement from colleges.

While the Apprenticeship Levy is a UK initiative, in Scotland it is being used to fund a £10m Flexible Workforce Development Fund. This makes available grants of up to £15,000 annually to support the upskilling and reskilling needs of the workforce of levy paying employers or those in their supply chain. This workforce development is delivered through the colleges. The approach is thus more flexible than in England where the Levy is intended only to fund apprenticeships.

Working with employers

Like England there is no statutory framework for involving employers. The importance of strengthening links with employers has been recognised in the DYW programme and in the Learner Journey Review.¹⁶ The Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB) was established following recommendations from the Commission on Developing Scotland's Young Work Force. It is led by employers and representatives of industry bodies from a range of sectors and provides employer leadership in the development of apprenticeship programmes in Scotland. At a strategic level, employers are involved through membership of the Strategic Board.

SDS has established a Centre for Work-based Learning to encourage partnerships between employers and educational institutions. Individual colleges have also taken initiatives to strengthen these links, such as the Industry Academies that have been established in City of Glasgow College. Independent Training Providers generally have strong links with employers and make a major contribution to the MA programme.

Learner Journey Review

The theme of the 'learner journey' has been an important one in recent Scottish policy and it has been further developed in the Scottish Government 15-24 Learner Journey Review¹⁷ which covers progress through the senior phase in schools (S4-S6), further and higher education, vocational training and apprenticeships and entry into employment. It builds on the DYW programme. The report from this review has emphasised a number of priorities for future policy development. This has included enhanced information, advice and guidance for all young people as they move through the learner journey and make career choices. Associated with this there is an emphasis on doing more for those who have got least out of the system. The importance of improving alignment between the various parts of the system is recognised and, although the focus is on the 15-24 age group, it is also recognised that *'a commitment to lifelong learning should be at the heart of any credible education and skills strategy'*. ■

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WALES

Background and context

Whilst it constitutes 8.5 per cent of the land area of the UK, Wales has under 5 per cent of the total population of 65.6 million, at just over 3.1 million.

Of these, more than one in ten live in the capital city Cardiff, and around one in four live in the Cardiff Larger Urban Zone. There is a marked concentration in the Cardiff Capital Region, comprising the 10 local authorities in the South-East corner of the country, and this contains around 1.5 million people. Perhaps despite appearances, only about one per cent of the economic activity in Wales is in agriculture, whilst the service sector, including expanding tourism, accounts for around two-thirds. The post-war decline of coal-mining and heavy industry continues to be felt, though with modernisation and diversification, manufacturing remains prominent, accounting for nearly a third of gross value added (GVA).

Some 38 per cent of private sector employment in Wales is in large enterprises (>250 employees); this is just below the UK average. Whilst SMEs account for around 62 per cent of employment, they represent 40 per cent of turnover. Wales has a great many very small businesses, with 'micro enterprises' (0-9 employees) constituting 95 per cent of firms.¹⁸

Overall figures for employment and unemployment show that Wales is a few percentage points more negative than the UK averages. Unemployment is relatively high for 16-24 year-olds. Wales has greater disparities than the rest of the UK amongst disabled people (both unemployment and poverty are more prevalent in Wales for this group). Some former industrial and mining areas have very high levels of poverty and other marked indices of disadvantage.

Policy framework

In recent years, the main components of the education landscape in Wales have been the subject of major commissioned reviews. These include: the Diamond Review of higher education funding and student finance;¹⁹ the Donaldson Review of the school curriculum and assessment;²⁰ and reviews of teacher education & professional development, including those by Tabberer²¹ and Furlong.²² FE and skills are within the full range of post-compulsory provision considered by the Hazelkorn report,²³ and a Welsh Government consultation based on its recommendations closes during 2018. Taken as a whole, the essence of the recommendations is to consider *all* the key elements of post-compulsory provision (further, higher, adult & community, work-based/apprenticeship and sixth-form learning) and their currently divergent mechanisms for governance, quality assurance, review, funding and accountability, and to refashion this fragmented set of overlapping concerns into a more coherent post-compulsory education and training tertiary system overseen by a single agency.

As well as the achievement of organisational efficiencies, the rationale for such a policy direction includes diagnoses of economic and social change, such as a predicted rise in demand for higher level skills. It is also thought to provide a way to rectify a current lack of strategic thinking at government and institutional level,

to reduce inefficient competition, and to overcome the current confusion on overlapping roles between and across institutions and agencies.

There are two other elements which help to explain the *blas* (flavour) of policy in Wales. The first is that the proximity of policymakers, practitioners and provision appears to be an important factor in the perceived authenticity of consultative engagement. The second is that, at least to some extent, shared values are articulated as part of the policy process. Donaldson's recommendations were explicitly informed by 'progressive universalism'. Hazelkorn highlights the desirability of '...a post-compulsory system perspective which can ensure a strategic, coordinated and coherent approach to educational provision for all learners and society', and of finding a 'better balance between supply-led and demand-led education. ...away from a market-demand driven system to a mix of regulation and competition-based funding'. Policy is often framed and justified in terms of the impact on people and the quality of lives, and there are overarching values encapsulated in the Welsh Government's 2017 National Strategy, *Prosperity for All* (in which 'skills' is one of only five 'key areas') and in legislation, such as the *Wellbeing of Future Generations Act* (2015).

Apprenticeships

The year 2014-15 saw almost 20,000 new apprenticeship starts, with another 48,000 already in training.²⁴ This total was divided between: Foundation Apprenticeships (Level 2) at 45 per cent; Apprenticeships (Level 3) at 39 per cent and Higher Apprenticeships (Level 4+) at 16 per cent. Apprenticeships in Wales are organised under some 120 'frameworks', many at multiple levels. Each framework contains competency and technical knowledge qualifications, and at least two Essential Skills qualifications (or equivalent). There is a commitment to maintaining qualifications as part of Apprenticeships, and to the National Occupational Standards in order to maintain parity of systems across the UK.

The Welsh Government predicts a doubling of the demand for qualified workers at Levels 4-6 by 2024 and, recognising the historic emphasis on Level 2, wishes to initiate a step-change in the nature of provision and

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participation. Apprenticeships are seen as ‘an essential ingredient of economic success and a vital tool in building a stronger, fairer and more equal Wales’,²⁵ and to this end the Welsh Government has instituted a five-year plan for phased introduction, wishing to see a minimum of 100,000 Apprenticeships by the end of the current Assembly term (May 2021). To be successful, this will require ‘stronger cooperation between academic and vocational education, and the way in which these systems work together’.²⁶ The Welsh Government proposes to integrate Apprenticeships into the wider education system, including the introduction of degree level Apprenticeships. Great emphasis is placed on partnership working, involving schools, colleges, work-based learning providers and the higher education sector.



The colleges representative body, Colegau Cymru, has argued that some current perceptions and practices in the school sector could hinder the realisation of such goals:

‘Too often, apprenticeships and vocational options are still not discussed as a realistic and desirable option for more able and talented learners, yet there are apprenticeships and BTEC qualifications that lead onto higher level learning, some of which reach degree level, with the added bonus of work experience.’²⁷

Finally, there are concerns about some apprenticeships (e.g. Construction) continuing to be highly gendered.

Colleges

Few would disagree with the view of Colegau Cymru when they say, ‘the FE sector is a key player in helping to deliver the Welsh Government’s aims to widen participation, tackle social exclusion and stimulate economic regeneration’. A process of regionalisation commenced in 2008 and has halved the number of distinct FE institutions. There are currently 13 colleges in Wales, with around two-thirds of all 16-18 year-olds studying in them. At the same time, well over half of the learners in colleges are over the age of 19.

Colegau Cymru estimates that the FE sector provides around 85 per cent of funded vocational and technical education in Wales.²⁸ It is worth noting that having reached a peak in 2005-06, overall learner numbers have continued a declining trend, though within this, there have been increases in work-based learning (WBL) in recent years. Across FE, Community Learning and WBL, there were 224,410 learners in 2015-16, and about a quarter of these were in WBL. Figures on learning activity show a great diversity of subject areas, with the most prevalent being: Engineering; Business, Management and Office Studies; Construction and Property (Built Environment); Care and Personal Development (including basic skills); Sales, Marketing and Retail; Catering, Leisure Services and Tourism. The same figures also suggest that under eight per cent of learning activity in college is clearly non-vocational (including A and AS level, GCSEs, Access Certificate and Diplomas, and FE college-based HE).²⁹ ■



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NORTHERN IRELAND

Background and context

The Further Education sector in Northern Ireland consists of six regional colleges operating across 40 campuses, spread across the country. The sector employs over 4000 staff and has a turnover of around £250 million per year. The colleges are the main providers of vocational and technical education and training in Northern Ireland (NI) although there are now a growing number of private training providers entering the market. The curriculum offered is broad and diverse extending from A levels and GCSEs to BTECs, HNCs and Apprenticeships. They also offer higher education provision with nine per cent of students undertaking higher level awards. In 2016/17 there were almost 130,000 total enrolments with 78 per cent of those obtaining recognized qualifications.³⁰ This sector is of significant importance to the NI economy working directly with over 7500 businesses and a range of private, public and community organisations.

Country profiles: Northern Ireland

Policy framework

The Further Education Means Business Strategy³¹ signaled an important shift in FE policy in NI, positioning the sector firmly at the forefront of economic and workforce development of the region. The stated aim was to ensure that the curriculum offered met the needs of employers in NI, particularly those small- to medium-sized employers (SMEs) which dominate the employment market. The strategy also set out to provide much greater support to employers in areas such as business development and ideas generation as well as providing the well-qualified workforce necessary to encourage foreign trade and inward investment. Prior to this strategic development, 30-40 per cent of the FE provision was in recreational areas rather than in areas that supported the economy, but with the introduction of a more economic curriculum through the strategy, 97 per cent of government funding is now directed into provision that leads to qualifications on the regulated qualifications framework with a significant vocational focus.³²

The 'Success through Skills Strategy'³³ and more recent 'FE Means Success Strategy'³⁴ maintain this focus on employability and business development. The latter document sets out eight strategic themes which guide the provision and contribute to the department's overarching aims.

Governance arrangements

Education is a devolved arrangement passed down to the NI Executive through a series of legislative agreements. In common with the other devolved regions, NI has had the freedom to develop regional policies and strategic priorities. However, the Assembly and Executive arrangements broke down in January 2017 and have not yet been reinstated. In previous years where an impasse has existed, direct rule has been implemented from Westminster with English Ministers being put in place to attend to NI business. The current political situation has mitigated against this solution and a recent initiative whereby senior civil servants stepped in to take key decisions, in the absence of a functioning Assembly or local Ministers, has been overturned legally, leaving the province effectively without any decision-making structures. It

remains to be seen what effect this will have on education in the long term. One practical example of the impact of this impasse is the Apprenticeship Levy, which is collected in line with UK arrangements but cannot be spent without the agreement of a devolved Minister.

Working with employers

The 'Northern Ireland Skills Barometer'³⁵ was conducted to identify the key and priority skills necessary to rebalance and rebuild the NI economy up until 2025. Using this research going forward FE colleges will have a crucial role, working with employers and other key stakeholders, to ensure that these skills gaps can be bridged, with individuals supported to access and gain appropriate skills. This Barometer is also intended to act as a driver for the further development of careers education, information, advice and guidance for future student intakes.



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Social inclusion

NI is a society emerging from conflict and the second strand in the FE Means Business Strategy³⁶ was to enhance social cohesion. The educational system in NI, like the province itself is divided in many ways with most children attending predominantly Protestant (controlled) or Catholic (maintained) schools. With academic selection still in place within the region, schools are also divided by ability and, in many cases, by gender.³⁷ The FE sector, therefore, is often the first opportunity many individuals may have to work and study with those from a different community background and this is something the NI Assembly seeks to encourage.



The multi-campus nature of the sector with over 40 FE campuses regionally allows those from rural communities to access appropriate qualifications whilst one of the key features of the FE sector is the diversity of the learners it attracts, ranging from those with no or very few qualifications to those who are following HE options. It is considered, therefore, that the colleges have a critical role to play in developing social cohesion.

College partnerships

One of the key themes of the current strategy is that of college partnerships. As well as the business partnerships envisaged by the strategy, the FE sector has also developed links with the school sector through Area Learning Communities, where local schools, colleges and industrial partners work together to share resources, disseminate best practice and link cohesively to enhance the learning opportunities and experiences of individuals within their geographical areas. The introduction of the 'Entitlement Framework' in 2013 was also designed to develop links from post-compulsory education to Further Education by offering learners a wider curriculum of up to 27 options with a balance of academic, vocational, applied and general subjects. The challenge will be to continue to maintain these partnership arrangements going forward.

Challenges and the way ahead

'Change in the FE sector is constant (and still gathering speed) meaning leaders face a daunting set of challenges'.³⁸ The FE sector in NI is subject to the same changes facing its counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. In addition to these common challenges – of funding, keeping up with new technology and with ensuring that the needs of the economy are prioritised – the FE sector in NI faces additional challenges due to the collapse of the NI Assembly. The FE sector, therefore, at the time of writing continues to address these challenges from within a political vacuum. ■

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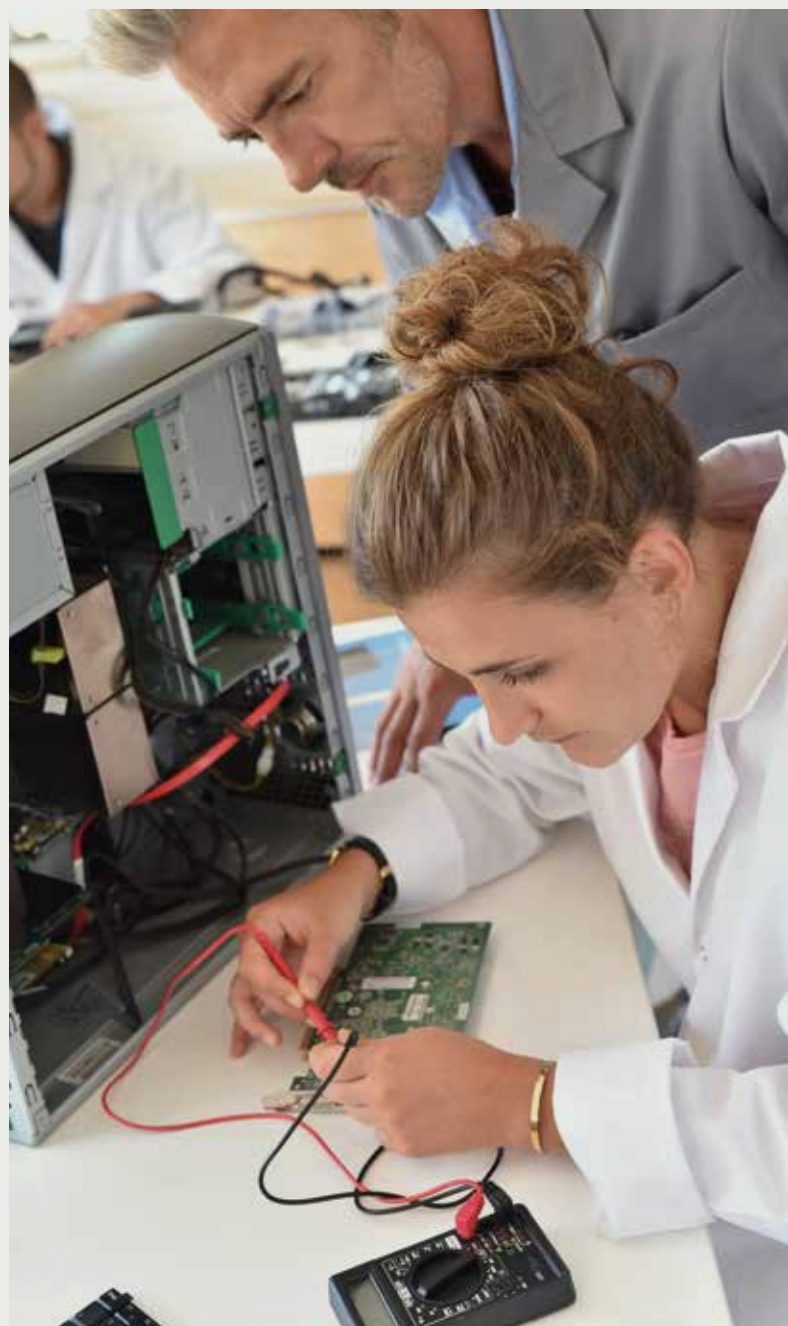
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Section 4 | Interesting practice

This section begins with a number of examples of innovative college-based practices that give a flavour of what is happening in each of the four countries of the UK. The second part contains examples of interesting policy initiatives.

College-based practices

A local college in an international city:

THE MANCHESTER COLLEGE, ENGLAND

LTE group – the voice for skills and education:

The Manchester College is part of the Learning, Training Employment Group (LTE), the first integrated education and skills group of its kind in the UK and the largest social enterprise in the country dedicated to learning, training and employment. The LTE group is made up of four specialist organisations - The Manchester College, Novus,

MOL and Total People – all with a shared mission and values. It employs 5000 people and provides education, training and employment opportunities to over 100,000 learners in 120 locations across the UK. Group turnover for 2016/17 was £184m

The Manchester College – be amazing:

The Manchester College is one of the largest general further education colleges in the UK and the number one provider of 16-19 and adult education in Greater Manchester. More than 25% of Greater Manchester's learning provision is undertaken by The Manchester College. It has 23,000 students, 1500 staff, over 400



courses, spanning 22 subject areas, and a turnover of nearly £65m for 2016/17. Currently there are nine main delivery locations in and around the city of Manchester: from Openshaw and Harpurhey in the north to Wythenshawe and West Didsbury in the south, as well as several locations in the city centre.

Over half of the learners at The Manchester College are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, deprivation on entry is greater than 75% and the college is ranked 239 out of 270 for lowest English and maths achievement on entry. The College is fully committed to equality of opportunity for all and supports more students to go on to university, work or further study than any other institution in Greater Manchester. It offers vocational sixth form education, A-levels, work-based learning, foundation learning, adult education, higher education and corporate training, as well as working with leading employers to launch careers for a work-ready Greater Manchester.

Partnership working to transform technical and vocational education

Fully supporting the direction of travel set out in the Post 16- Skills Plan the college has already embarked upon changes based on partnership with industry. In addition to working with Gatsby, Greater Manchester Colleges Group (GMCG) and Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) on capacity building for T Levels, the college has committed to a co-branded, co-created and co-delivered vocational training system, with industry helping to design and deliver appropriate training for business needs. All learners now have work experience opportunities, a quarter of Level 3 learners are on co-created, co-branded courses and the college is developing its own T Level readiness by taking part in the National Work Placement pilot.

Proposals are underway to consolidate The Manchester College's estate to five sites - including a new campus in the city centre and significant remodelling and investment at the Openshaw Campus – to significantly improve the quality and attractiveness of the learning offer for residents and employers.

The Manchester College as a stakeholder and advocate within the local area has developed strong relationships with the local authorities to influence the development of strategies and approaches around work and skills. The college is also part of the GMCG, a partnership of nine further education colleges, covering all boroughs across the GMCA region. Collaborating in this way provides a strategic focus for further education in Greater Manchester, developing the workforce and entrepreneurs needed to support and grow the economy. Current key aspects in collaboration with GMCA are:

- devolution of the adult education budget
- supporting 14-19 attainment
- developing an Institute of Technology specialism
- capacity building in technical and professional education

Serving the local community – FE as a bridge to the local economy

Further education is situated both physically and educationally within the local community. But those communities themselves are ever changing, reflecting new ideas, cultures and needs. The notion of change is critical to ensuring that services, curriculum and delivery take account of what is needed. At the same time, the College is also a bridge between communities and the local economy. Social mobility is a critical pillar in its approach as a College and reflects the need to be proactive in terms of its learners needs but also to advocate for them in a dynamic local economy.

Careers not courses

A major challenge is to work with local people (both adults and those aged 16-18) who are far removed from both learning and the workplace. The College's focus on social mobility and the need for advocacy means that it values the process of building relationships between itself, learners and employers. In 2016 the College relaunched its strategy to focus on careers not courses to underpin the GMCA and Manchester City Council (MCC) strategies and fulfil its primary purpose of improving the lives and economic success of its learners and communities.

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The college as an anchor institution

BELFAST METROPOLITAN COLLEGE, NORTHERN IRELAND

Belfast Metropolitan College is one of Northern Ireland's largest FE colleges with an enrolment of over 37,000 students across a number of city centre campuses. The college caters for the education and training needs of the 21st century with specialist staff and state of the art facilities. It provides support for businesses and prides itself on the innovation and quality of its awards.

Its flagship campus is located in the Titanic Quarter of Belfast, creating an exciting learning experience in the heart of a recently developed area which showcases and combines, for an increasingly booming tourist market, the city's cultural and historical development.

Based on Queen's Island on the east bank of the River Lagan, Titanic Quarter has links to the history of the city stretching back to the nineteenth century. An extensive

area of the island formed part of Harland and Wolff's shipyard at a time when Belfast was a world centre of maritime trade, shipbuilding and commerce. This shipping line, which built the famous and ill-fated Titanic ship, had provided employment for many over the years but as demand for shipbuilding services dried up and the employment trends turned towards the service industries, the land became free and unused.

The Titanic Quarter covers a 185-acre site on the banks of the River Lagan and in line with trends in other cities (such as the Docklands area of Dublin and the Greenwich area in London) development was along the river. The Titanic Quarter has arguably been one of the most transformative projects over the last decade and it is the tangible symbol of the potential for the city in the modern era. Since 2006, over £328m has been invested and the area is now a diverse mix of residential, tourism, retail, employment, learning, transport and cultural projects. As well as the major learning facilities of Belfast Met, the area is also home to Citibank, Audi and the Northern Ireland Science Park.



When the college relocated to the new £44 million campus in the Titanic Quarter in September 2011, it acted like a magnet, drawing important organisations and businesses to what was once an unloved and unlovable part of the city, forming a critical mass which attracted and continues to attract other high profile tenants. The Titanic Maritime Museum opened in 2012 and was voted as the ‘best tourist attraction’ at the World Travel Awards in 2016³⁹ while the Titanic Hotel (opened in 2017) and the George Best City hotel (opened in 2018) continue to build on the city’s growing attraction as a leading tourist destination.

However, it is important to note that Belfast Met does not just occupy this important site and bring learners into the heart of the city. In fact, it is much more than just a sitting tenant, working with the surrounding and local industries to meet their diverse needs.⁴⁰ The staff and management for these new hotels were all trained at the College and it provides an important incubator function for businesses who have new product ideas and seek innovative support for growth. The college works extensively with business partners and the college’s award-winning Business Development Team is dedicated to enterprise, economic development and employability, offering a huge portfolio of programmes and services, including training, mentoring, business support initiatives, consultancy, student projects, student placement and strategic graduate programmes. They also work with numerous local, national and international business support agencies and constantly build on their networks of enterprise organisations and employers. They provide apprenticeships to local businesses and some of their alumni have gone on to work in the surrounding enterprises and throughout the region.

This case study outlines how an anchor tenant, such as the Belfast Metropolitan College, can bring life to an area which was previously unused and underdeveloped. It can bring youth to that area, through the large influx of students attending on a daily basis and it can bring vibrancy and innovation through its work with local businesses and local entrepreneurs.

Junior apprenticeships

CARDIFF AND VALE COLLEGE, WALES

The Junior Apprenticeships scheme is an innovative approach to a complex and interlocking set of problems.

In Wales the proportion of 16-18 year olds who are ‘NEET’ (not in education, employment or training) has reduced a little in recent years: it is now between 8% and 10.4%, depending on the calculation used.⁴¹ This is a little below the UK average, but still a major policy concern. The Junior Apprenticeships Programme is part of a response, based on the concept of early identification of young people most at risk of becoming NEET.

The Programme delivers full-time vocational education to learners aged 14-16 years, whom schools have identified as at risk of disengaging. On the whole, the young people concerned are not responding well to what schooling is offering them and some face difficult home circumstances and/or have additional learning needs and require intensive support.

Young people study full time in a college setting under the guidance of industry qualified specialists and in vocational facilities and real work environments. The learners pursue a vocational diploma (level 1 - 2) and GCSE Maths, Numeracy and English, plus the skills elements of the Welsh BaccaLaureate. All those who successfully complete the two-year programme are guaranteed an apprenticeship or a full-time course at a higher level.

The first pilot year was very successful and the programme received strong endorsement from the young people and their parents. This continued into the second year and support and positive reports also came from employers, schools, local authorities, ministers, councillors and the Welsh Government. At the end of the two-year full programme, almost all of the young people secured apprenticeships with a range of employers in the public, private and third sectors.

Junior Apprenticeships are jointly funded by Cardiff City Council, Cardiff and Vale College, and Cardiff schools (with 18 schools in a partnership arrangement and more

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wanting to join). There are six vocational pathways (Automotive, Construction, Digital Media, Hair & Beauty, Hospitality & Catering, and Public Services).

Several factors appear to underlie the success of this initiative. The Cardiff and Vale College Vice-Principal points to the programme being seen by all concerned as a ‘*genuine* pathway towards a high-paid job’. She also highlights: the significance of young people experiencing success, perhaps for the first time in an educational setting; a high level of enthusiasm amongst staff; and the motivating effects when learners find themselves in the company of leading practitioners (such as a Michelin-starred Chef). One young person on the Programme said of the College, ‘The building is amazing and it’s really different to school. I feel more independent and you can really be yourself’.⁴²

Sociologists of education have long argued that the school curriculum and assessment regime generate failure as well as success. Increased expectations around academic achievement are likely to exacerbate this effect, whilst at the same time it becomes even more difficult for young people to access secure jobs when they do not have the so-called ‘threshold’ at GCSE. The Junior Apprenticeships Programme seems to acknowledge this dilemma to the benefit of young people themselves as well as to the wider society/economy. In doing so, it bridges an old divide running through the purposes and work of FE colleges, between skills for work and social inclusion. It also meets the overarching criterion identified in a recent influential report on the most effective and successful vocational programmes, namely that they are characterised by ‘a clear line of sight to work’.⁴³



Problem solving pedagogies:

SOUTH EASTERN REGIONAL COLLEGE, NORTHERN IRELAND

South Eastern Regional College (SERC) is one of the six regional FE colleges based in Northern Ireland. It has over 1000 specialist employees with student enrolments of 35,000 in seven campuses across the south eastern area of the region.⁴⁴

In 2014, SERC moved towards a 'project based learning' curriculum across all campuses and subject areas. Staff were encouraged to meet together in multi-disciplinary teams to source real-life projects with either external partners or from within the college. The projects were required to be 'activity based with defined and agreed outcomes, specific milestones and resources'⁴⁵ which must also meet the assessment criteria of the awarding body. Since that time, this approach has been developed and is now an accepted norm for staff in that college. This model lends itself well to developing skills such as critical thinking, innovation, communication, collaboration, media and ICT literacy and self-regulation in learners as they transition from school to working life. In the case of vocational education, it marries the theoretical with the practical. It also supports the Department for Employment's Strategic Theme of Economic Development.⁴⁶

Each year, during the first week of the September term, the College designates an Enterprise Week where all full-time students complete a challenge to identify an innovative solution to a specific problem, tailored to each vocational area. Problems are sourced from the many local companies who have formed strong links with the college and are keen to have fresh and innovative ideas presented to them. This initiative is entitled 'Get the Edge' and is a flagship project for the College.

This marks a significant departure from traditional induction activities and emphasises the college's commitment to new and innovative ways of working. Students from all subject areas and across all levels are encouraged to take part, forming interdisciplinary groups to discuss the problem and identify solutions. Throughout the week, as they address the various challenges inherent

in their design process, they use technology to keep a weblog, highlighting the many iterations of their solution. These video logs enable the students to demonstrate their progress and build on the strong technological ethos of the college.⁴⁷ As this activity is currently conducted during the induction week, the majority of students taking part in the challenge are new to the FE environment, with many transitioning from school and deciding on an FE progression pathway only a few weeks earlier. Employers are on the judging panel and they provide important feedback to the students when they present their innovative solutions using a range of technologies.

One such example concerned trolleys which were operational on the shop floor in the Royal Mail sorting depots. These trolleys were pushed around the operating floor by staff but as there was no way of easily knowing when the brake was activated this posed a health and safety risk. Groups of students at the college met together to consider potential solutions, factoring in costs, time and safety. They were then given the opportunity to present their ideas to their tutors and peers and also to the company, who provided feedback on their ideas as well as their presentational and communication skills. Royal Mail provided component parts to the college allowing the students to build prototypes and test these out. Some of these ideas have now been transferred into actual solutions which has had a hugely positive impact on the students involved and on the business. Students were then provided with an opportunity to complete their placement with Royal Mail to gain additional real-world working skills.⁴⁸

This project based learning approach is now a feature of all full-time programmes in the college enabling students to develop skills such as commercial acumen, communication, problem solving and team work and inspiring knowledge, raising aspirations, confidence and employability.

Conclusions

This innovative approach has the potential to be developed further and there could be other opportunities to blend educational projects with business projects throughout the year, not just in the Enterprise Week as at present. Further opportunities for work placements with these business and

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industry partners can be fostered as well as the completion of industry projects, volunteering and the incubation of student companies. The Enterprise week experiment has also embedded the ethos of enterprise and entrepreneurship within the college. One other added benefit has been that staff have included problem based methodologies on a micro basis into their daily classroom practice, harnessing their own specialist industrial experience and displaying their own innovation and creativity.

College statistics⁴⁹ suggest that 97% of students enrolled on SERC courses move on to employment, self-employment and further education or training on completion of their course. Their efforts are accredited through a qualification which is embedded in their main programme of study. There is over 90% achievement in these accredited units and they provide an additional qualification as evidence to employers.

Whilst not without its challenges (such as staffing and timetabling) SERC is rightly proud of this innovative approach and continues to pilot both medium- and large-scale projects across vocational areas, bridging traditional silos by getting teams to work collaboratively. This is an interesting practice which could be rolled out throughout all of the Northern Ireland regional colleges or in FE contexts in other national contexts. International and European developments are also possible.⁵⁰

Industry academies:

CITY OF GLASGOW COLLEGE, SCOTLAND

The City of Glasgow College is now the largest college in Scotland. A recent £228 million development has resulted in two award winning campuses, one in the city and the other on the riverside, the latter reflecting the College's continuing involvement in nautical training. While enrolling students from all parts of Scotland, and other countries within the UK, it also welcomes students from around 130 countries across the world.

To match the opportunities provided by the new state of the art campuses, and reflecting the College's interest in developing innovative approaches to teaching and learning, the College has established Industry Academies (IAs). These are part of a long-term plan to change the

nature of the student experience. Central to this approach is the development of closer ties with employers and moving the curriculum to one in which these relationships have a central place in shaping the experiences of both students and staff. In all of these developments there is a greater emphasis on work experience, work placements and work-based learning. Student projects are often based on briefs from industry and are collaborative in character. There is also an emphasis on establishing stakeholder forums and external speakers are involved where possible. The focus is on providing new approaches to vocational education and training which will prepare students well for work in the 21st century.

IAs have now been established in all six faculties within the College. The following give some examples of the range of initiatives which are being established:

- A STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) IA has been established in the Faculty of Building, Engineering and Energy which has been awarded STEM assured status by the new Engineering Foundation, while at the craft level a Wall and Floor Tiling IA (WAFT) has now been recognised as a national centre for excellence.



- In the Faculty of Creative Industries a Craft Academy has been established with a collaborative space where students can develop their skills in interdisciplinary and employer-led projects. The same faculty has also established a Networking for Entrepreneurship ERASMUS project involving partners from Finland, Slovenia and Spain. Staff are encouraged to adopt a mentoring approach through cooperation with industry in a European context, which enables students to develop the entrepreneurial skills they will need to become successful independent creative artists and craft workers.
- The Faculty of Nautical Studies has also been able to build on the range of partnerships which it has with many of the major merchant navy training organisations as well as shipping companies in developing a range of IAs.

The work of developing IAs is challenging, in so far as it involves what is often a new approach to curriculum design, learning and teaching and assessment, and it is still work in progress in CoGC, but it represents an interesting and innovative approach to college education for the 21st century.



Policy initiatives

Skills competitions as a lever for change:

WALES

It has long been observed in the UK that vocational qualifications and the skills they represent are undervalued in comparison to academic qualifications. The reasons for the lack of ‘parity of esteem’ are complex and deep-rooted, but its effects are more than personal, and are likely to include major inefficiencies in the supply of skills and its negative effect on business. The persistence of the problem is sometimes taken to mean that nothing can be done about it.

One interesting strategic response may be to raise the profile and visibility of the highest vocational achievers. The Welsh Government is funding the *Inspiring Skills Excellence in Wales* project, led by Coleg Sir Gar. This brings together three strands of activity, namely:

- *Skills Competition Wales*, a series of local competitions run by a network of colleges, training providers and employer organisations. Categories include: Media and Creative; Construction and Infrastructure; Engineering and Technology; IT and Enterprise; Hospitality and Lifestyle; Inclusive Skills.
- *International Competitor Support*, which provides funding to facilitate the support and development of would-be competitors in both EuroSkills and WorldSkills.
- *‘Have a Go’*, an initiative with the explicit aim to increase participation in vocational routes, especially apprenticeships. Six vocational fields are represented, using events, contact with inspiring individuals and the provision of physical equipment.⁵¹ As well as a leadership team, the project draws on a Skills Ambassador Network comprising some 55 individuals based in a cross-section of colleges and other providers across the country. The project has a clear set of goals. These include providing an ‘...infrastructure to deliver improved medal winning success at National and International Skills Competitions for competitors from Wales.’⁵² At the same time, there is a ‘GDP focus’, targeting areas of skill required to enhance specific sectors of the economy. The project is also

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designed to improve awareness of career pathways available to young people, to give specific support in the form of coaching and development, and to increase the skills and knowledge of the range of providers by refreshing their contact with world-class standards and talent. A ‘showcasing’ function is also important. The project brings together colleges, work-based learning providers and employers to build on (and now support) a rising trajectory for skills in Wales. Wales is now the best performing region of the UK in International Skills Competitions in terms of number of registrations, number of competitors in UK finals, and continuous representation in the UK squad.

Inspiring Skills Excellence in Wales deliberately presents the international competitions as the ‘Skills Olympics’. Whilst this is a longstanding parallel, its current emphasis is ingenious, given the popularity of sport in Wales and the profile of Welsh sporting achievement on the international stage. Geraint Thomas winning the 2018 Tour de France is just the most recent example: in the 2016 Rio Olympic Games, Wales had the highest number of medals per member of the population compared to all other parts of the UK.⁵³

Front row: Elizabeth Forkuoh (competitor, Restaurant Services); Eluned Morgan, Minister for the Welsh Language and Lifelong Learning; Alfie Hopkin (competitor, Web Design).

Back row: Barry Liles, Skills Ambassador for Wales; Joseph Massey (competitor, Aeronautical Engineering); Ethan Davies (competitor, CNC Milling); Paul Evans, Pan-Wales Skills Coordinator.



Trackers apprenticeship programme: JERSEY

Jersey is a small self-governing island with a population of 102,400—a similar size to Worcester or Carlisle in the UK. As Jersey sets its own policies and budgets, the island’s apprenticeship programme is able to operate independently of similar programmes in the UK.

A new apprenticeship model for Jersey

Following a review of apprenticeships on the island, the Jersey government decided to look at a new model of apprenticeships which it placed within the remit of the Education Department. The new model (‘Trackers’) was launched in 2012. There were two major changes: a new funding model and the use of coach/mentors.

Funding

Prior to 2012 funding had been given to employers in the form of a grant. In 2012 this was replaced by funding for training, which was paid directly to a training provider and ‘followed’ the apprentice. This meant that if the



apprentice was made redundant, Trackers could support them into employment with another employer thus enabling the apprentice to retain their college place and complete their apprenticeship.

A ‘mentor model’ of apprenticeships

All mentors are employed by the Trackers programme and are therefore independent of both employers and training providers. Each mentor has an average caseload of 25 and the age range of apprentices is very broad – from school leavers to people who see themselves as more ‘mature’ learners.

Stuart Penn, Skills Jersey’s Operations Manager, explains their role:

“Apprentices are given a dedicated, qualified mentor to coach, support and guide them through their apprenticeship. Mentors meet regularly with apprentices on a one to one basis to help develop their soft skills; help arrange employer, apprentice and tutor meetings and challenge and develop apprentices to reach their full potential. To support the apprentice in getting the best from their apprenticeship, mentors use coaching/mentoring techniques such as personal reflection, performance review, goal setting and action planning. They meet with apprentice and employer on a quarterly basis to facilitate progress reviews and joint goal setting.”

What did employers and apprentices think of the new model?

A year after the new programme began, employers and apprentices were asked for their views. Just over 50% of employers who responded had been involved with the previous States of Jersey scheme.

When asked their views about the best thing about the programme, 69% of employers’ comments were related to mentoring. Some saw the mentor as a valuable ‘intermediary’ between the employer and the college and one employer commented: *‘What surprised me most is the relationship that is built first with the student and then the employers, so necessary to ensure a positive outcome for all.’*

Many apprentices mentioned that they too had been surprised by the help and support they received from their mentors and 68% of apprentices said that for them this had been the best thing about the programme. Here are a few comments from the apprentices:

‘It’s good to know that there is someone other than the teachers to ask for help, not only for the course but in other areas of learning.’

‘What an amazing group of people, so willing to assist in all aspects of the course. As I am a mature student this was very important to me, thank you.’

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Has the Trackers 'mentoring model' been successful?

Yes!

- The success of the programme can be seen not only in continued positive feedback, but also in the improved retention rate. This has risen from 60% (under the old programme) to over 90% since the new programme's inception in 2012.
- As every apprentice has a dedicated mentor, apprentices who leave the programme early are able to be supported into positive destinations by someone who knows them and has worked with them over a period of time.
- The programme remains popular with employers despite the change in funding.

And a final word from one of our recent Level 3 graduates: *'For me, the Trackers Programme worked very well.*

As I was only 16, coming to work was a very new and scary thing, (my mentor) made sure I had 100% support throughout my apprenticeship and still now 4 years later.'

Foundation apprenticeships: **JERSEY**

In 2014, the Jersey government recognised that it needed an intervention to support young people who were unsure of their future route. They may have lower attainment, lack self-confidence or simply not have made a decision about their next steps.

The programme the government designed was a Foundation Apprenticeship lasting a year to help these young people to develop their confidence, sample different careers and begin to plan their future. The programme has four main components:

- Two days per week on a personal development programme run with the Prince's Trust to help the young people to develop life skills and confidence.
- Two days per week on a work placement, which can be either a single placement for the full year or a mixture of shorter placements to sample different careers.



Penny Shurmer, Head of Enterprise Skill Development, Skills Jersey

As a small island we can't afford for anyone to be left behind – every one of our young people needs our help to develop the skills and attributes to support our economy and society.

For a small group of young people, we recognised that in their teenage years they struggle to find which path to take without the skills or academic results to move on confidently.

The Foundation Apprenticeship was designed to help exactly this group – by giving them personal development, workplace experience and the support of one of our mentors.

They leave the programme with much greater confidence, practical experience on their CV and an agreed plan for their next steps.

- One day per week of customer service and IT training to increase skills in some of the areas that employers in this particular labour market most value.
- Alongside this, support from a trained mentor, including face to face meetings at least every three weeks. The mentor helps the young person to get the most out of the programme, reflecting on their experiences and planning their future goals.

Whilst providing significant support, the programme costs less than a college place and in 2017 100% of participants completed the course with a positive outcome –20% into apprenticeships, a further 50% into other paid work and the remainder into training.

Degree apprenticeships: ENGLAND

Degree Apprenticeships were introduced in 2015 by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government to combine the best of academic study and practical work experience. Degree apprentices are able to finish their apprenticeship with a university qualification, significant employment experience and no student debt.

They are different from other apprenticeships because they can include a full Bachelor's or Master's degree as part of the apprenticeship. They complement England's education system by offering an option for those that might not have considered higher education the chance to pursue a career path that is right for them. The model also presents an excellent vocational alternative to traditional higher education.

Degree Apprenticeships are designed and delivered by employers, working in partnership with education providers, to bring the benefits of employer-led jobs with training to all levels of apprenticeship employment and equip England's workforce with the higher level skills needed in our economy.

These industry-designed programmes may be delivered as block, distance or blended learning and students are employed as full-time apprentices while spending at least 20% of their time doing off-the-job study towards their degree.

Numbers on the programme are growing rapidly. Since the introduction of Degree Apprenticeships in 2015, we have seen over 11,130 starts at Level 6 and 7: 100 starts in the academic year 2014/15; 770 in 2015/16; 1,700 in 2016/17; and 8,560 in the first three quarters of 2017/18.⁵⁴

Degree apprenticeships are available in a wide range of sectors and occupations, such as Automotive, Digital, Engineering, Nursing, Chartered Surveying, Aerospace and Nuclear. There are currently 35 Degree Apprenticeships available, with more in development.

Alongside Degree Apprenticeships, there are currently 13 apprenticeships at Level 6 or 7 that do not include a degree but give individuals the opportunity to gain higher technical skills, often linked to professional registration.

Regional outcome agreements (ROAs): SCOTLAND

In 2012-13 Scotland introduced an innovative approach to funding colleges - Regional Outcome Agreements (ROAs). The result of a process of mergers and regionalisation is that Scotland now has 27 colleges; 10 single college regions and 3 multi-college regions. The ROAs are now the mechanisms which enable the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to agree the outcomes through which a college will meet the needs of the region, and the funding which will be provided to meet these needs.

In the ROA the colleges provide a regional context in which the demographic and economic needs of the region will be analysed. This will include information about the population, deprivation rates, economic profile including characteristics of the local economy and employment/unemployment rates, skills and qualifications, school leaver destinations, and partnerships that the college has with



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other organisations in the region. The Scottish Government and the SFC have indicated the strategic priorities that they expect colleges to focus on, and these inform the outcomes which the college will outline in their ROA.

Firstly, there will be an indication of how the college will help to contribute to *economic development and growth* in the region. This will involve identifying key industries and the ways in which the college can provide support, including apprenticeship training and lifelong learning to meet the needs of existing workers for retraining and up-skilling. Given the importance of the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) programme in Scottish Government policy and strategy, there will be a continuing focus on the needs of young people for appropriate kinds of vocational education and training.

Secondly, given the emphasis in national policy on addressing issues associated with social and economic deprivation it can be expected that colleges will indicate the ways in which they will *promote social inclusion and help widen access to education and training*. This will include measures to create opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as second chance opportunities for adult returners. There will also be recognition of the needs of young people who have been in care and those with disabilities.

Gender issues will also be addressed including the under-representation of women in STEM subjects. The importance of courses in English as a Second Language (ESOL) for refugees and other migrant groups will be recognised in many colleges.

The third set of issues which are likely to be addressed will be ones to *improve the quality of learning and teaching*. This will include measures to enhance student engagement, developments in the learning and teaching strategy, quality enhancement and professional development.

The fourth area likely to be included in ROAs relates to *maintaining sustainable and high quality institutions*. This will include outcomes relating to financial management and planning, governance, challenges associated with climate change, and creating non-SFC income streams.

Having outlined the outcomes which will be sought, ROAs will then specify the student numbers agreed for various programmes to achieve these outcomes and how the funding which the SFC expects to allocate will be used to achieve these target numbers.

The SFC is using ROAs to assist them in monitoring the impact of colleges both regionally and nationally, and to inform future funding decisions.



Policy partnership in action:

WALES

In a 2011 comparison across the four UK nations, it was found that for Scottish and Welsh FE college Principals:

‘...dialogue with (and occasional influence upon) policy-makers is a normal expectation of all parties. By contrast, some leaders in English colleges perceive that they have little or no chance to influence the development and implementation of policy’.⁵⁵

The same study concluded that Welsh college leaders had historically enjoyed a more active engagement with policymakers than their English counterparts, confirming earlier comparative work which had also underlined the prevalence of *partnership* in Welsh policy processes.⁵⁶ A variety of probable reasons were identified, including the size and scale of the country, its political texture and social and economic history, and the effectiveness of Colegau Cymru⁵⁷ as a vehicle for deliberation and collective voice.

The term ‘social partnership’ is most often used to refer to agreements and processes between employers, trade unions and governments for handling industrial relations over time. ‘Policy partnership’, whilst more difficult to define, appears to be an important feature of the policy landscape in Wales, especially in the area of further education and skills. The following examples provide some illustration of this point.

- Partnership is woven into the fabric of the main advisory and decision-making bodies in Wales. The Welsh Government’s *Council for Economic Development*, chaired by the First Minister, is a primary source of advice for government on economic and business policies and reflects duties enshrined in legislation. Its membership includes business, social enterprise and trade unions. The *Wales Employment and Skills Board* (chaired by the Wales Commissioner to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills) also has this breadth of representation. In addition, Wales has three *Regional Skills Partnerships* (focused on: South East; North; South-West and Mid-Wales) whose Boards include representatives from employers in the public,

private and third sectors; local government; further and higher education; work-based learning providers; and employment services. The three Partnerships analyse economic challenges and likely growth areas, identifying skill needs. They are charged with annual reporting to government, including recommendations that can shape how the government uses its skills funding.

- In broader terms, educational policy-making in Wales relies heavily on the commissioning of independent reviews carried out by experts with a background in high-quality academic research. These reviews often declare a basis in values of partnership and encompass commitments to communities. They are often followed by consultations which are generally regarded as authentic by the main interest-groups. There are also attempts by government agents to engage relevant interests in co-construction of new arrangements (e.g. the new model for the professional development of teachers being developed during 2018).
- In 2008, the Welsh Government launched *Transforming Education and Training Provision in Wales*, a policy and framework for post-16 reconfiguration. This has some similarities to the later *Area Based Reviews* process in England, in that it challenged all providers to set aside existing institutional arrangements and plan provision collectively across a geographic area, removing duplication. Whilst there was a compulsion to participate, the policy was not prescriptive in its approach to change. Providers were asked to form partnerships across geographic areas and/or skill sectors, then come up with regional evidence-based solutions.
- ColegauCymru/CollegesWales was originally set up in 1993. It has a board of directors made up of all the college principals in Wales and a core staff team led by a Chief Executive Officer. The organisation is highly networked, with staff or Board members representing Welsh FE on a range of committees and working parties that shape post-compulsory and lifelong learning in Wales. ColegauCymru also provides a wide range of services to the sector, including research, raising awareness of FE, professional development, sharing of good practice and developing leaders. Its annual

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conference in 2018 included an address from the Minister, and this and many other keynote sessions at the conference made reference to working together for the realisation of government priorities.

Whilst it is important not to overstate the degree of harmony in and across FE and Skills in Wales, there is little doubt that *partnership* is a constant theme with an expectation that this will promote more effective outcomes.

Sub-regional and regional collaboration following area-based reviews in London:

ENGLAND

Post-16 Area-based Reviews (ABRs) in England were initiated in 2016 by the Conservative Government to undertake two tasks: first, to create fewer and more viable college groupings and second, to create closer relationships between colleges and employers in the context of the new standards-based apprenticeship and emergent T-Levels. While the ABRs in England, that concluded in 2017, have focused much more on the first than the second of these tasks, their organisational aftermath should be closely observed. This is not only in terms of the new larger college groupings and their system effects, but also the pursuit of the second objective, which is now being focused on the creation of local strategic fora to develop institutional collaboration, college specialisms and to work with employers. We have suggested earlier in this report that the ongoing area-based agenda potentially brings the English FE sector, which is known for its marketised character, a little closer to the more collaborative system features of the other three countries of the UK.

In the case of London (with a population larger than the combined total of the three smaller UK countries of the UK or the next 20 largest English cities), the focus of this collaborative venture is the four emergent Skills and Employment Boards (SEBs), comprising representatives from local and regional government, employers, the community and FE providers, that are being formed to take forward the regional skills agenda at sub-regional level.



Through their agreed Terms of Reference, SEBs are being tasked to improve and promote collaboration and information sharing between boroughs, employers, colleges, universities, private training providers and employment services to address skills gaps; to engage employers to identify a range of skills needs; to promote the voice of the learner and to develop a rolling three-year commissioning strategy. They are also expected to collaborate with regional bodies over the Adult Education Budget for London; to support apprenticeships; and to contribute to the Mayor of London's skills and industrial strategies.

There are, however, some questions hanging over the operation of the new sub-regional bodies. One is the degree of inclusivity and buy-in from key strategic partners. Like the formal ABR meetings, collaboration and inclusion have to be balanced with manageability across a wide range of stakeholders. Therefore, individual FE colleges or college groupings do not necessarily have a seat at the table. The same applies to employers. Allied to this

is the strength of the new regional and sub-regional fora and their strategies. The sub-regional SEBs do not have specific powers over colleges, so this collaborative effort is taking place against a contradictory background of continuing institutional competition involving a number of large college formations and within a greater pan-London policy and funding drive from the Mayor. In this context, the degree to which these sub-regional bodies herald a new era of collaboration may well be influenced by the quality of civic leadership, a sense of local identity and the potential for urban regeneration capable of capturing the imaginations of FE colleges and employers alike.

A tertiary sector linking further and higher education: **SCOTLAND**

Scotland differs from other countries in the UK in that there is one body which is responsible for funding and strategic direction of both the college and university sectors – The Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council (SFC). This organisation was established in 2005 following a recommendation from the Scottish Parliament's Inquiry into Lifelong Learning and was seen as a step towards establishing a system for lifelong learning in Scotland. Wales maybe heading in a direction closer to the Scottish system if it follows the recommendations in the Hazelkorn Review.

The Board of the SFC has members drawn from the college and university sectors, as well as employers and members of professional bodies. The SFC provides most of the funding for colleges, for teaching in the higher education institutions (HEIs) and a significant amount of core research funding. It receives a letter of guidance from the Scottish Government each year which outlines the strategic priorities for both the college and HEI sectors. There is therefore significant integration of the two sectors at the level of funding, strategic direction and governance. However, each has its own sector body to represent its interests: Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland.

The profile of students in the colleges also contributes to a further level of integration between the college and university sectors. About 20% of students in colleges in Scotland study at a higher education level compared with

about 7% in England, and the percentage studying at this level has been increasing. Reflecting the high percentage of students at this level, colleges are now known as Scotland's Colleges rather than FE colleges.

Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNC/Ds) have remained the main qualifications taken by HE level students in Scotland's Colleges, accounting for around 77% of these students (foundation degrees, which have to some extent displaced HNC/Ds in English colleges, have not been introduced in Scotland). While HNC/Ds were originally developed as part-time qualifications for those who were already working, the percentages of part-time HNC students has been declining while the percentages of HND students has been increasing; 84% of all HNC/D students are now on full-time courses. Many students are now using HNCs and, in particular, HNDs to progress to degree level study in universities. While there is considerable variation between subject areas with some students, such as those on social care courses, using their qualification as a terminal one to gain a recognised vocational qualification, in other areas, such as business studies and computing, more than two thirds go on to further study, mainly at degree level in universities. This has been referred to as 'articulation', and the SFC has implemented strategies to encourage and strengthen these links. In this way the link between vocational courses in colleges and in universities has been strengthened, and the route for many students to employment is through college and then university.

A further aspect of this linkage between qualifications at different levels is the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF). This is a 12-point framework on which all qualifications, including vocational ones such as the Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) and university degrees up to doctoral level, are located.

Overall then, while Scotland does not have a fully integrated tertiary system, there are elements in place which have encouraged closer linkages between the college and HEI sectors, and these have some significant implications for progression routes for students in Scotland as well as the achievement of the higher level vocational qualifications needed to support economic growth. ■

Section 5 | Common challenges and opportunities for policy learning across the countries of the UK

Common challenges

Opportunities for policy learning arise, in good part, as a result of the identification of common challenges across countries that broadly share the same economy, but that have also developed somewhat different trajectories in the area of education and skills policy.

Throughout the seminar series discussions, a number of inter-related challenges for all four countries of the UK were identified. We have included a brief summary of 11 of the most often cited below. However, these challenges appear to fall into different but related types. The first are the ‘known unknowns’ – big upcoming changes in the policy landscape and in technological development (e.g. Brexit and the Fourth Industrial Revolution) – that could transform the narrative of the role of education and training. The second type of challenge might be regarded as ‘system historical’ – issues arising from the status of vocational education and the consequences of various levels of institutional competition that have been prevalent through previous decades, albeit to different degrees across the countries of the UK. The third type of challenge is related to the second, notably the role of further education colleges as they try to balance the different missions that have arisen from their historical system position. The fourth type of challenge is relational, building partnership working with a range of social partners in order to rise to the new economic and social issues that affect all four countries of the UK. The fifth challenge arises from a historic absence; the relative failure in all countries of the UK over the last 20 years to build a system of lifelong education involving adult learners. And finally, there are a host of practical challenges concerning areas such as assessment and professional development in a new digital age.

1. Brexit

While we do not yet know what type of Brexit we are going to get, the fact remains that the UK is leaving the European Union. This throws up a number of issues for FE and skills systems. All four countries’ economies currently rely on freedom of movement across the EU to bring in unskilled and skilled labour to fill job vacancies and to tackle skills shortages in many sectors. In the aftermath of Brexit, the UK economy will be much more reliant on growing and developing its own skilled workforce. This is something which FE and skills systems in all four countries of the UK need to be geared up to address, particularly in relation to growing skills shortages in key areas of the post-Brexit economy.

2. The Fourth Industrial Revolution

A similar ‘known unknown’ is preparation for the so-called ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’, resulting from rapidly increasing technological innovation. As a part of the education and training system that is very closely aligned to the economy and its future, this is a particular area that concerns FE and skills providers across the UK. The seminars raised questions such as: what initial education and training will young people need to meet these challenges? What type of retraining and upskilling will those already in employment need to support them to make the changes required?

3. The status of vocational education and training

According to seminar participants, in all four countries of the UK vocational education and training is regarded as less valuable than academic education by young people and

Common challenges and opportunities

their parents. The desire to take A Levels/Highers and to gain a place at a prestigious university is still driving behaviour despite continual reforms of vocational qualifications that are designed to make them more effective and attractive. Moreover, vocational qualifications themselves are often seen as an alternative route into higher education rather than as a step towards an apprenticeship or employment – witness the rising numbers of young people taking BTEC Diplomas at Level 3 now using them to enter university. For FE and skills providers this sometimes means that their institutions are seen as ‘second best’. They are constantly having to struggle to gain funding and recognition for the important work they are doing now and will need to do in the future, as indicated in 1. and 2. above.

4. Under-developed Careers Education Information Advice and Guidance (CEIAG)

Given that in all four countries of the UK pathways into and from vocational education and training are less well understood than the ‘royal route’ from A Levels/Highers to university, the need for effective CEIAG is essential. Despite research, reviews and policy initiatives, concerns remain about the quality and reach of CEIAG in all countries of the UK. Seminar participants cited powerful anecdotes about how competitive behaviour between schools and colleges, and between colleges themselves, had led to young people not being made aware of the full range of educational and employment opportunities in their locality. While CEIAG cannot solve this problem alone, it can provide an important antidote to this kind of partial information that is not in the interests of the young person. As noted above the importance of an enhanced CEIAG has been recognised in the recently published Learner Journey Review Report in Scotland.

5. Defining the role and purposes of FE colleges

FE colleges in all parts of the UK offer a very diverse range of learning opportunities for both young people and adults, that is also determined to a large extent by the provision of other education institutions (schools, universities and independent training providers) in their locality. For this reason, it is often difficult to define

precisely the role and purpose of FE colleges, which hampers their status and profile in public perception. National policies in all countries have further muddied the water by demanding different priorities at different times. It seemed throughout the seminar series, however, that in all countries of the UK colleges’ role in providing technical and vocational skills had risen up government agendas in recent years. Nevertheless, as we indicate below, this may not meet the range of demands of the communities in which colleges are located.

6. Balancing a high skills technical and vocational mission with social inclusion

All UK colleges have to tread a careful line between serving the needs of their community and of the economy, as well as meeting evolving national government agendas. Developing the technical and vocational skills for their country’s economy has always been a strong aspect of UK colleges’ work, but this can be in tension with their social inclusion mission. It was clear from the seminars that colleges’ social inclusion mission was more overtly highlighted in policy statements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than it has been latterly in England. Nevertheless, this dual mission for UK colleges remains and can cause issues in terms of financial viability and mission drift.

7. Developing long-term partnerships between employers and FE and skills providers

The seminars also threw up some interesting examples of innovative partnership working between employers and FE and skills providers to support high quality and up-to-date technical and vocational education (see the case studies in Section 4). However, there was a recognition that operating in this way was not easy for a number of structural reasons that apply to the UK economy as a whole.

Historically, employers in the UK have not played the central role in the design and delivery of technical and vocational education and training that employers have in other parts of Europe, such as Germany, Switzerland and Austria. UK employer bodies are by no means as strong or cohesive as those in other countries. While national

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government policies continue to build employers into the design and delivery of technical and vocational education and training, the approach has been primarily through exhortation, moral appeal and financial incentives rather than through legal frameworks. In this voluntarist environment, it is not surprising that employer-college partnership building remains challenging and something that has to be built up piecemeal at the grassroots level.

Moreover, there are good reasons why employers might find it hard to play the part that government has assigned to them. Meeting the demands of the plethora of educational activities that national policy expects can appear incompatible with the running of a viable enterprise and increasing productivity. This is particularly the case for SMEs that make up the largest proportion of UK businesses. In addition, policies in this area are constantly changing, making it difficult for employers to understand and keep up with the latest trends and funding streams. Many have little or no capacity in terms of time or training expertise. At the same time, growing apprenticeships will test the structural issues to the limit regardless of the national setting.

8. Balancing competition and collaboration – the role of wider social partners and relationship building

Employers are not the only social partners with whom FE and skills providers in the UK need to engage more proactively to meet the needs of the communities in which they are situated. The seminars underlined the importance of colleges collaborating more actively with a range of other local and regional partners, such as local authorities, universities, schools, independent training providers, voluntary and community organisations, to improve opportunities for both working and living. Becoming local anchor institutions and building ‘comprehensive social ecosystems’, it was suggested, requires greater collaboration and a reduction in unhelpful competition between providers (see Section 4). While it was broadly agreed that the degree of marketisation in the FE and skills systems in England was significantly greater than in the other three countries of the UK, there was evidence of competitive institutional behaviour in all four.



Common challenges and opportunities

9. An over-emphasis on young people and the need for the development of adult skills

It was evident from discussion at the seminars that there has been a reduction in the number of adults studying in FE colleges across the UK over the past few years.

The policy emphasis, and hence sources of funding for provision, has increasingly been focused on young people. The economic challenges indicated in Point 1 above and the need for people to remain economically productive for longer, however, highlight the importance of FE and skills providers being involved in upskilling and reskilling the adult population.

10. Improving teaching, learning and assessment

Although the seminar series concentrated predominantly on the policy and governance aspects of the FE and skills systems across the UK, each of the seminars also considered issues of pedagogy and professional practice. Here all four countries recognised the need for both ongoing improvement and innovation, not least because of the opportunities and challenges offered by technological change. Examples of some interesting developments in this area are illustrated in the previous Section on 'Interesting practice'.

11. Funding, retaining and developing high quality lecturers and managers

Finally, it was recognised that across the UK as a whole FE struggles to recruit and retain high quality teachers and managers because of the higher salaries and sometimes better working conditions that highly skilled professionals can command in industry and other education sectors. Short-term contracts, part-time work and flexible or zero-hours contracts can be a lifestyle choice for those who have other employment or family commitments, but is not an answer for the FE and skills system as a whole and it appears that these employment practices are on the increase in colleges.

Identifying these common challenges across the UK proved useful in terms of examining where not only

convergence or divergence might be taking place, but also in highlighting possible areas for policy learning.

Opportunities for policy learning – rather than policy borrowing

The types of challenges we have outlined in the first part of this Section provide some guidance as to the upcoming opportunities for policy learning in the area of FE and skills across the UK.

The early part of this Section has highlighted some of the main common challenges across the UK that arose from discussion in the seminar series. Section 4 has highlighted areas of interesting practice in each of the four countries of the UK and Jersey. Here we bring these different strands together to suggest areas where policy learning might take place between the different countries of the UK. Some of these were discussed in the final seminar while others were mentioned and have been further extrapolated from a distillation of the common challenges. In all cases, however, there appeared to be a willingness among participants in the seminars to explore these areas in more depth and to make active use of the 'UK policy and practice laboratory'.

The evidence from the seminar series as a whole suggests that an accelerated period of policy divergence across the UK in recent years is now starting to be reversed, particularly in terms of FE and skills policies, with indications of some 'managed convergence'.

Taking advantage of this in policy development terms requires a proper understanding of what is meant by 'policy learning'. As we have seen earlier, this is not simply a matter of ill-considered policy borrowing that is neither properly thought through nor sensibly adapted to take account of relevant circumstances and constraints. It first requires the identification of common problems and challenges facing the different countries, as well as recognising and understanding the influence of national contextual factors. Secondly, the seminar series emphasised the importance of another aspect of policy learning: that policy development should actively involve all the main partners - education practitioners, employers and researchers, as well as policy makers at the national and local levels. This type of policy

FE and skills

development already appears to be evident in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but is currently less clearly so in England. It was recognised that this is partly due to the relative sizes of these three countries when compared to England: it is easier to get all the partners in the same room in a small country. It also has to be noted that with recent initiatives, such as the development of the T Levels in England, there has been a concerted effort to involve employers, researchers and practitioners more fully in the policy development and implementation process.

Policy learning suggests that the focus should be on developing good practice by tackling common problems and sharing knowledge and experiences at different levels, rather than simply seeking to transfer 'excellent' practice across boundaries at the national policy level.

Bearing this in mind, a number of questions were posed in the final session of the seminar series as potential areas for policy learning and knowledge sharing in FE and skills across the four UK nations.

How will FE colleges and skills providers rise to the big system and historic challenges?

Colleges will be approaching these big challenges from slightly different system positions and national traditions. Therein lies the opportunity for developing a new phase of the FE and Skills policy and practice laboratory and, in particular, examining how different forms of education and employer collaboration are being developed in relation to the challenges.

The big challenges thus give rise to two related questions regarding opportunities to develop a new skills narrative and a new body of collaborative practice. First, what measures are FE and skills providers taking to address the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Brexit? And second, to what extent are they moving from a *skills supply model* to a *co-production* model in partnership with employers?

From a discrete sector to an integrated system – an increasingly common path?

There was evidence to suggest that across all the countries of the UK FE is moving from being a discrete and competing sector to becoming part of a wider integrated local/regional

system. Even in the case of England, the most marketised context, the aftermath of Area Based Reviews has produced a new emphasis on social partner collaboration at the local and sub regional levels. However, this direction of travel begs a number of questions.

First, what is the right balance between collaboration and competition between education providers and what degree of autonomy should FE colleges have to address the common problems identified?

Second, and related to this, how can relations between social partners be strengthened in the absence of the highly regulated vocational education and training system that we find, for example, in Germany, Austria and Switzerland?

The role and purposes of FE in the shifting landscape?

As FE colleges move from being part of a discrete sector to being partners in an integrated local system, their role and purposes come to the fore. What is their distinctive contribution to a local or sub regional high-skills ecosystem?

Will it be about blending in new ways their historical responsibilities of social inclusion and vocational specialisation?

And what can colleges in all countries of the UK learn from one another about addressing social inclusion, developing effective and sustained relationships with employers and promoting learner progression within and between FE and HE?

FE colleges in all four countries have been reorganised in different ways – what can be learnt from this?

FE colleges in all four countries in the UK have undergone reorganisation and merger over the past decade; albeit that the regionalisation processes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were different from the Area-Based Reviews in England. Nevertheless, FE colleges in all four countries find themselves in a relatively similar position of having to pursue the mission of social inclusion while also developing relationships with employers at the local and

Common challenges and opportunities

regional levels. So, the obvious question is how much can these countries learn from each other as colleges become larger and more federal formations but still have to meet their historical and system responsibilities?

Growing apprenticeships – how far is this the pressing UK-wide issue?

While each of the work-based routes in the respective countries have their differences, in contrast to systems like those in Austria, Germany or Switzerland, apprenticeships in the UK appear to have a particular character.

One particular policy innovation, which moves away from this tradition, has been the development of the Apprenticeship Levy; giving rise to a particularly strategic question - How is the Apprenticeship Levy being managed across the four nations to support the development and delivery of high quality apprenticeships that meet employer expectations and raise productivity levels?

Learning, leadership and professional innovation – in what ways are these linked?

The system and future challenges arising across all the four countries of the UK, raise issues of how to foster innovative learning for students and for college staff.

Here the seminars give rise to three related questions.

What innovative approaches to pedagogy, such as project-based and digital learning, are in evidence across UK FE and skills providers?

What can be learnt about how professional development and capacity building is undertaken in the different countries of the UK to build a high quality and resilient FE and skills workforce for the future?

And what forms of leadership are required to meet the challenges facing the new larger college formations?

Laboratories need to be sustained with usable and common evidence

The idea of a UK-wide policy learning laboratory is based on a balance of commonality and difference. But it may be the case that the creation of a sustainable policy learning laboratory will, in the long run, be based on greater commonality and sharing and less difference. Here the seminars raised the issue of how the considerable data sources on FE and skills that now exist across the four countries of the UK might be used to support future policy development? ■



Next steps

Section 6 | Next steps – towards a new policy learning network

In this final Section of the report we suggest three next steps to support policy learning in the area of further education and skills across the UK. Despite differing trends in governance, particularly between the three smaller countries and England, those involved in the Inquiry came to the clear conclusion that there are, nevertheless, conducive conditions for policy learning in the area of further education and skills. This is due not only to the existence of a number of common problems, but also a recognition of areas of interesting policy and practice taking place in response to the perceived challenges. This realisation was shared between policy-makers; practitioners and researchers in the project seminars, with a commitment to explore further how social partners from each of the four countries of the UK might continue to work together to support this vital aspect of education and its links to the economies of the respective countries.

The proposed next steps are as follows:

1. To build on the discussions and conclusions from the Project by deciding in principle to establish a **policy learning network** to continue the dialogue between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners across the four countries of the UK. This could be both virtual and one which also organises joint events where the opportunity and funding arise.

2. To identify a **number of areas of ongoing enquiry** for the Network including those arising from ‘interesting practice’, the common challenges and the initial identification of potential areas for policy and practice learning. These include:

- Area-based and regional approaches to FE college development.

- Building apprenticeships and a vocational curriculum for the 21st Century.
 - Inclusive approaches to labour market access for both young people and adults.
 - Exchanges of ideas and practices regarding pedagogy and digital development.
 - Experiments in co-production of vocational education and training involving education providers, employers and local and regional government.
 - Responses to the challenges posed by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Artificial Intelligence and Brexit.
 - Approaches to leadership of the new larger FE college formations.
 - Professional development strategies and practices for those working in or with the FE and skills area.
 - Exchanges of relevant data to support research and research-informed decision-making.
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3. To take **several practical actions** to establish the new Policy Learning Network by:
- Identifying the leadership/convenor of the new network.
 - Inviting participants to establish its terms of reference.
 - Agreeing an initial programme of information exchange.

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