

'Home International' Comparisons of Post-16 Education and Training

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Devolution has increased public interest in comparisons of education and training within the United Kingdom. Post-16 provision differs significantly across the four territories of the UK, and their administrations are pursuing distinctive policies. Even before devolution, 'home international' comparisons offered considerable potential for policy learning as well as for more theoretically-driven research. From 1997 to 1999 the ESRC-funded Home Internationals Project compared education and training for 14-19 year-olds in the four territories. This *Briefing* summarises its findings on participation and transitions in post-16 education and training.

- **The** post-compulsory education and training systems of the four UK territories have many features in common. Many of the differences can be seen as variations on common themes.
- **The** four systems may diverge following devolution, as each pursues its own strategy for 'unifying' post-16 education and training.
- **Participation** at 16 has been highest in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and it is rising fastest in Scotland. However, participation in Scotland is shorter in duration and less equitably distributed, and comparisons are less favourable to Scotland when calculated on the same age basis.
- **Despite** weaker divisions between tracks, Scotland has the most advanced level of 'academic drift' and together with Northern Ireland it is furthest from achieving parity of esteem for academic and vocational options at 16-plus.
- **All** four systems share a 'British' pattern of participation and transition, characterised by the strong influence of qualifications gained at 16, relatively low participation beyond 17, distinctive youth training programmes and weak vocational pathways to employment.
- **Home** international comparisons are most valuable for policy learning if they compare systems over time. 'Cross-sectional' comparisons can be misleading indicators of the effectiveness of different policies or institutions.

The four systems

When the UK's four systems of post-compulsory education and training are seen in a broader comparative perspective, their similarities are more conspicuous than their differences. Many of the differences represent variations on common themes. For example, the FE college is a distinctively British institution; yet the role, client group, organisation and funding of FE vary significantly across the four territories. The four systems also share a distinctive model of youth training, but this is organised separately in Northern Ireland, and in the 1990s youth training arrangements in Scotland and Wales have diverged from those in England.

England and Wales have more diverse post-16 institutions than Scotland or Northern Ireland, with more institutional competition and greater overlap in the functions of schools and colleges. Scotland has different courses and qualifications. Even before the Higher Still reforms of 1999, Scottish courses were broader, more flexible and more 'modular' than in the rest of the UK, and the division between academic and vocational tracks was weaker.

Policy learning

Policy analysts have tried to learn from the differences among the four systems. For example, in the 1990s commentators argued that the structure of courses and qualifications in Scotland encouraged a better curriculum, higher participation and more equal opportunities. Policy-makers in the four territories, interviewed in 1997, agreed that 'home international' comparisons provided opportunities for policy learning, especially at the post-16 stage. However, the processes and politics of policy-making have discouraged learning from systematic comparisons. Policy-making before devolution involved exchanges between the territories in the development of policy, rather than systematic comparisons of the effects of different policies after they had been introduced.

Unification and divergence

Most countries aim to 'unify' their post-16 education and training systems, and to develop closer links between

academic and vocational learning (see *Briefing No 15*). However there are different strategies for unification. Scotland is introducing a (partially) unified system, while England and Wales are pursuing 'linkages' strategies for unification. It is too early to identify the approach to unification that Northern Ireland will follow under the Assembly.

The four systems of the UK may diverge as each pursues its own strategy for unification. Post-compulsory education and training systems have become larger and more functionally complex, with extended pathways. They have had to find new principles for coherence, progression and co-ordination of what had previously been specialised and loosely connected institutions. As each territory constructs closer links between the different elements of its own system, it may reduce the links or common features between the systems.

Nevertheless the four systems continue to be interdependent. They share many functions of policy-making and development, and there are large flows of students and teachers between the systems.

Participation

Full-time participation in education has risen in all four countries, but the trends have not been parallel. As measured in official statistics, participation at 16 was 10 percentage points higher in Scotland than in England in the mid 1980s. It then grew more rapidly in England which closed the gap by the early 1990s: in 1993 the participation rate was 73% in both countries. Thereafter it declined in England and continued to grow in Scotland: in 1997 participation was 69% in England and 80% in Scotland. The Welsh trend has been close to that in England. In Northern Ireland participation rates at 16 have generally been similar to Scotland but have recently declined.

Table 1 describes the year group which completed compulsory education in 1990. More Scots stayed on at school - even after the minimum-age winter leavers had left - but fewer entered the less visible FE sector, and more left after only one year. Furthermore, relative participation rates in Scotland were lower when

Table 1 Survey estimates of participation in full-time education

	England	Wales	Scotland
% of school year group:			
at school in autumn of first 'post-compulsory' year	41	40	71
at school in spring of first 'post-compulsory' year	38	38	55
in FT education in spring of first 'post-compulsory' year	58	59	58
in FT education in spring of second 'post-compulsory' year	52	51	43
in FT education in spring of third 'post-compulsory' year	39	38	35
% of age group (defined by age on 31 August) in FT education in following spring:			
at 16-plus	58	59	50
at 17-plus	52	51	39
at 18-plus	39	38	34

Source: adapted from Raffe, Croxford and Brannen (1999), Table 4

calculated on the same age basis as England and Wales, rather than in terms of equivalent school year groups. However, Table 1 describes a period when official statistics showed similar participation rates at 16 in England, Wales and Scotland. Since then, participation has risen much more in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK.

Throughout the UK females, high attainers and middle-class youngsters were most likely to stay on. The gender difference was smallest in England and largest in Northern Ireland. Inequalities in relation to prior attainment and social background were slightly stronger in Scotland. However, the pattern and distribution of participation was broadly similar in all four territories.

Academic and vocational tracks

Scotland and Northern Ireland had the highest participation in youth training in the early 1990s, and they also had the highest aggregate participation in post-compulsory education and training. Our study suggests that work-based provision is important for inclusiveness and for achieving a high level of participation.

Nevertheless, academic drift was furthest advanced in Scotland. That is, Scotland had the highest proportion of participants in academic rather than vocational education or training.

We measured the parity of esteem for academic and vocational options at 16-plus in terms of the characteristics of the students who entered them. In the early 1990s entry to academic rather than vocational options was most strongly associated with prior attainment in Scotland and Northern Ireland, which were therefore furthest from our notion of parity. In particular, the full-time FE sector attracted fewer and less qualified 16-plus entrants in Scotland than elsewhere.

Transitions to the labour market

In each of England, Wales and Scotland, more than 60% of the cohort which completed compulsory education in 1990 had entered the labour market by spring 1993 when they were 18 or 19. Their dates of entry were more staggered in Scotland, where there were more exit points from school. The most common first destination was a full-time job in England and a training programme in Scotland and Wales. By the age of 18 or 19, 68% of labour-market entrants in England and Scotland had found jobs, compared with 57% in Wales. Unemployment was lowest in Scotland, where one in ten were still in training programmes. The Scottish youth labour market appeared to be relatively favourable to 17 and 18 year olds: those who entered at 16 had stronger flows into employment over the following two years, while those who entered at 17 and 18 fared better than their English and Welsh counterparts. Some of these differences reflected current

conditions, but the country differences could not all be explained in terms of local unemployment rates or other local factors. The occupations of 18 and 19 year olds were similar across the three territories, and consistently different for males and females.

In all three territories, qualifications gained at 16 were a strong influence on finding a job and on the occupational level of the job obtained. Vocational qualifications were associated with finding a job (although some people may have used their job to get the qualifications, rather than the other way round) but not with the level of occupation. There was no association between studying in FE and either employment or occupational level, net of qualifications. Those who had been on youth training programmes were less likely than others to be in employment at 18/19, and this difference was larger in Scotland than elsewhere.

Discussion

In all comparative research there is a tension between emphasising differences and emphasising similarities. On the one hand, we found significant differences among the four UK territories, which could not be attributed to the different social and educational composition of young people or to different local circumstances in each territory. On the other hand, many of the differences were relatively modest, and several features did not vary significantly across territories. Some of these common features are also characteristic of other European countries, while others reflect a distinctively 'British' pattern of participation and transition. They include:

- the critical role of qualifications gained at the end of compulsory schooling, as a determinant of further participation and progression in education and of success in the labour market;
- levels of participation in full-time education that are still modest by international standards, especially at 17 years and above, and early entry to the labour market by many young people;
- gender biases, in the distribution of participation between (female) full-time and (male) work-based provision, and in occupations;
- the relative unimportance of vocational programmes as pathways to the labour market, and the low occupational returns to vocational qualifications;
- youth training programmes which boost participation, extend access and mediate the transition to the labour market for many early leavers, but are associated with poor labour-market outcomes.

To the extent that the research has found differences between the territories, it has qualified, if not undermined, beliefs about the superiority of the Scottish system. Scotland has the highest level and fastest growth in participation in the first post-compulsory year, but it has also had the shortest duration and the least equitable

distribution of participation, and its relative participation appears less favourable when calculated on the same age basis. Northern Ireland does better on many comparisons of participation. The research found little evidence of the benefits of Scottish 'flexibility'. Academic drift is further advanced in Scotland than elsewhere, and vocational education is further from achieving parity of esteem with academic education.

However, the research warns against simplistic interpretations of these comparisons. They do not readily show which type of education system is most effective. Indeed, the two territories with the least similar systems - Scotland and Northern Ireland - often had the most similar outcomes. Comparisons which aim to identify the effects of different institutions or policies need to compare changes in systems over time.

Issues for policy

- The UK's post-compulsory education and training systems of the UK may diverge, but the research highlights their similarities, their interdependence and their similar patterns of participation and transition. There needs to be continued co-operation and coordination of policy across the four territories.
- We should be wary of using cross-sectional comparisons to draw simplistic conclusions about the effectiveness of different systems. We can learn most from 'home international' comparisons by comparing changes over time.
- Policies throughout the UK need to address the relative weakness of vocational pathways to employment.
- The research suggests that a strong work-based sector is more important for the level and inclusiveness of participation, while a strong full-time vocational sector is more important for parity of esteem and for avoiding academic drift. At least, vocational provision must be sufficiently diverse to achieve these different ends.
- The particularly low status of vocational education in Scotland poses a challenge for Higher Still. It must be prepared to challenge dominant academic values, to protect the positive features of the vocational tradition, and to bridge the apparent gulf between schools and colleges.

Related publications

Raffe, D. (1998) "Does learning begin at home? The use of 'home international' comparisons in UK policy-making", *Journal of Education Policy*, 13, pp.591-602.

Raffe, D. (forthcoming) "Investigating the education systems of the UK", *Oxford Studies in Comparative Education*, issue on the *Education Systems of the UK* (ed D. Phillips).

Raffe, D., Croxford, L. and Brannen, K. (1999) "Participation in full-time education beyond 16: a 'home international' comparison", to be published in *Research Papers in Education*.

Raffe, D., Brannen, K., Croxford, L. and Martin, C. (1999) "Comparing England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: the case for 'home internationals' in comparative research", *Comparative Education*, 35, 1, pp.9-25.

Raffe, D., Brannen, K., Fairgrieve, J. and Martin, C. (1999) "Participation, inclusion, academic drift and parity of esteem: A comparison of post-compulsory education and training in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland". Paper to European Research Network on Transitions in Youth, Oslo, September.

Raffe, D., Brannen, K. and Croxford, L. (2000) "The transition from school to work in the early 1990s: a comparison of England, Wales and Scotland", to be published in *Journal of Education and Work*.

Further information

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About this study

The Home Internationals Project was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (R000236840). The project reviewed existing statistics and research, interviewed policy-makers in the four territories, and constructed and analysed an integrated dataset on the experiences and transitions of young people in the early 1990s. This dataset was based on: the England and Wales Youth Cohort Survey of young people aged 16 on August 31 1990, surveyed in spring 1991, spring 1992 and spring 1993; the Scottish Young People's Survey of the year group in S4 in 1989-90, surveyed in spring 1991 and autumn 1993; and the Northern Ireland Secondary Education Leavers' Survey of secondary school leavers, surveyed in 1992 and 1994/95. All the English and Welsh sample members, and nearly all the Scottish sample members, completed compulsory education in 1990. The Northern Ireland sample described 1992 school leavers, and had to be converted to a year-group basis for the study.

Related CES Briefings

No 10: "School-to-Work Transitions in Ireland and Scotland, 1979-1991" by Emer Smyth and Paula Surrridge.

No 15: "The 'Unification' of Post-16 Education" by Cathy Howieson and David Raffe.

No 19: "Inequality in Attainment at Age 16: A 'Home International' Comparison" by Linda Croxford.

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