

Policy Learning From 'Home International' Comparisons

by David Raffe and Delma Byrne

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Political devolution has stimulated debate about the extent to which education and training policies are diverging across the four home countries of the UK. At the same time, it is suggested that institutional and policy differences across the four countries provide opportunities for comparative research to support policy learning. This *Briefing* discusses policy divergence across the four home countries of the UK and outlines a rationale for policy-relevant 'home international' comparisons. It draws on two studies at the CES.

- ▶ There is a process of constrained divergence of the four home countries' education and training policies. The constraints on divergence tend to be stronger in post-compulsory learning than in schools policy.
- ▶ Different processes and dynamics of change are emerging in the four countries.
- ▶ Writers have reached different conclusions on the distinctiveness of Scottish education depending on their perspective and their implicit concept of system. Different perspectives may also lead to different conclusions about convergence and divergence.
- ▶ Educational institutions and contextual factors vary less across the home countries than in other cross-national comparisons. This makes the UK a natural laboratory for analysing the effects of policy change on educational outcomes. Divergent policies provide an opportunity to study comparative change, which may provide stronger evidence of cause and effect than comparisons at a single point in time.
- ▶ However, like other studies of 'what policy works', home international comparisons do not always produce clear conclusions about the educational impact of different policies.
- ▶ Home international comparisons can also support a broader concept of policy learning, which is more than mere policy borrowing or the identification of best practice. This involves more detailed comparisons of policies in context, to gain a richer understanding of possible policy responses to shared concerns and of the practical issues in the development and implementation of policies.

Constrained divergence

The political devolution of 1999 followed a process of administrative devolution over earlier decades. It has stimulated debate over whether education and training policies are diverging across the four home countries of the UK (Ozga 2005, Paterson 2003, Phillips 2003, Rees 2004, Reynolds 2002). Some commentators perceive a fundamental difference in the direction of policy. Scotland and Wales, they argue, pursue broader goals than England and give social inclusion, social justice, citizenship and personal development equal weight with economic concerns. They place less emphasis on markets, institutional diversity, competition and quantitative targets and more emphasis on comprehensive education, social partnership, integrated policy approaches and structural remedies for exclusion.

Other commentators emphasise the limited autonomy of the devolved administrations and the continued similarity of policy goals and priorities across the four countries. The devolved administrations' formal powers are restricted, especially the Welsh Assembly Government which depends on Westminster for primary legislation. They have limited capacity and resources for independent policy-making. Their education and training policies must 'join up' with reserved policy areas such as social security and employment, and they all connect with UK-wide structures such as the labour market. The four systems are interdependent, and any country which takes a very independent line in matters such as qualifications risks putting its own citizens at a disadvantage. They are influenced by what Rees (2004) calls a strong 'British system' of education policy, and by UK-wide or global policy and research discourses. According to Stacz and Wright (2004, p.14) all four countries use 'inducement-type' policy instruments in order to pursue the same policy aim, namely a 'broad trajectory towards a demand-led system which is responsive to need'.

There are many instances of policy difference, and sometimes of policy divergence, across the four home countries. For example, policies for comprehensive schools have diverged since the 1980s. England has pursued a model of comprehensive education based on diversity and choice; Scotland and Wales remain more committed to the concept of the community-based comprehensive school (Phillips 2003). Northern Ireland plans to replace its selective system with a model closer to the English approach.

The LSDA study identified several areas of post-14 learning where policies have diverged (see box). However, it did not find evidence of major divergence in the overall directions and priorities of policy for post-compulsory learning. In all four countries policy documents use similar rhetoric, refer to similar goals (social as well as economic) and invoke similar policy instruments. A study of policies for compulsory education might have found more fundamental differences in the approach to such issues as school

management and organisation. Some of the factors which constrain divergence, such as the labour market, affect post-compulsory learning more than schools.

Areas of policy divergence

- **14-19 qualifications.** The three countries of Great Britain illustrate 'tracked', 'linked' and 'unified' strategies for academic and vocational education (Howieson and Raffe 1999). England is to develop distinct vocational diplomas from 14 years. The Welsh Baccalaureate is an overarching qualification which links academic and vocational qualifications. Scotland's National Qualifications represent a partially unified system.
- **Youth training.** In the 1980s a single Youth Training Scheme covered England, Wales and Scotland; only Northern Ireland had separate provision. Since 1990 all four countries have developed separate arrangements for youth training. England and Wales plan to integrate apprenticeships with other vocational provision; in Scotland and Northern Ireland they remain separate. England is committed to 'apprenticeships for all'; the three devolved administrations still distinguish apprenticeship from other work-based provision.
- **Short-cycle higher education.** England and Northern Ireland are committed to Foundation Degrees, Wales is more equivocally committed and Scotland has rejected them in favour of established HNC/Ds. Wales has a relatively university-based model, Scotland and Northern Ireland a college-based model, and England (at least in rhetoric) a more employer-based model. England, Wales and Northern Ireland are promoting diversity while Scotland is rationalising its provision.
- **'Threshold' skills for adults.** 'Threshold' skills are the minimum skills for effective participation in adult life. The types and levels of skills which define this threshold vary across the four home countries. The four administrations are supporting different interventions, organised in different ways, and involving a different mix of sectors, institutions and agencies.
- **Credit frameworks.** Scotland and Wales are developing loose, 'enabling' frameworks to cover all sectors and levels of learning. England and Northern Ireland recently consulted over a proposed unit-based regulatory framework, which will initially cover only vocational qualifications. There is a separate higher education framework for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. However all UK frameworks use a similar concept of credit and there is scope for future convergence.

In addition to specific policy differences there is a more subtle process of divergence which affects all sectors of education and training. This is not the unfolding of contrasting grand strategies, but the development of distinctive dynamics of change in each country. There are at least three aspects of this process.

First, the systems of governance and regulation - the arrangements for planning, funding, quality-assuring and regulating learning, and for its local administration - are becoming increasingly differentiated across the four home countries.

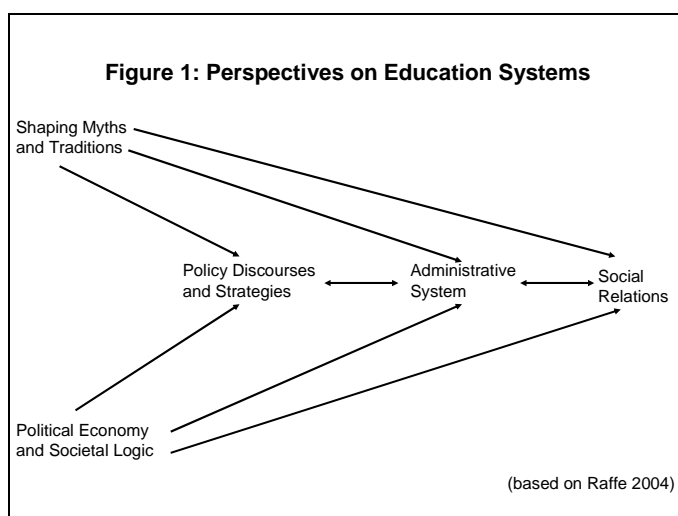
Second, there are growing differences in the ways in which issues are linked, demarcated and ordered within each country's policy agendas. For example, in Scotland there is no policy debate about 14-19 education, but nearly all the issues raised by 14-19 developments in

England and Wales are encountered in Scotland, often as part of quite different policy agendas.

Third, since 1999 the devolved administrations have conducted wide-ranging reviews and involved a broader range of stakeholders in developing and implementing policy. The closer engagement with each country's distinctive civil society is further encouragement for different dynamics of change across the UK.

Perspectives on convergence and divergence

So far we have discussed divergence in terms of the policy discourses and strategies of the four administrations. However there are other ways of viewing the convergence or divergence of education systems. Figure 1 identifies five perspectives from which writers have discussed the distinctiveness of Scottish education. Each perspective entails a different concept of an 'education system', and each offers a different view of the ways in which Scottish education, or any other system, is distinctive. Each perspective similarly offers a different view of whether the UK systems are becoming more or less distinctive - that is, whether they are diverging or converging.



Policy discourses and strategies are (as argued above) an example of constrained divergence. This in turn may contribute to a divergence in the *administrative systems* of education, that is, the more formal aspects of institutional structures, curricula, qualifications systems, patterns of governance, and so on. The home countries' administrative systems have many similar features, especially in comparison with other countries, but over recent years the differences between them have increased, especially between England and Wales.

The divergence in administrative systems may in turn be reflected in divergence in the *social relations* of education. By this term we understand all that actually happens in education - what students learn, their experience of learning, the relationships between students and teachers, levels of participation and attainment, class and gender inequalities, and so on. The

social relations include educational 'outcomes' and most targets of education policy.

The arrows in Figure 1 show possible causal links. The policy discourses, administrative systems and social relations of education may themselves be influenced by two broader influences: the education system's *shaping myths and traditions*, and the social, economic and political context of education, or what Figure 1 describes as its *political economy and societal logic*. Myths and traditions influence the 'assumptive worlds' and 'collective narratives' of policy-makers (Ozga 2005). They vary across the home countries, but these differences are (almost by definition) stable and not diverging. And the four countries share a political economy and societal context which are very similar (compared with other countries) and not diverging.

Learning from home international comparisons

The UK may thus provide a natural laboratory for examining the effects of divergent policies on educational outcomes. It is often hard to draw practical conclusions when we compare policies with overseas countries because of differences in the education systems and their social and cultural contexts. The 'other things' are not 'equal'. The differences in the administrative systems of the four home countries are much smaller, and the contextual differences are either relatively small or (in the case of shaping myths and traditions) stable. Therefore, if we find that different policies in the four countries are associated with different outcomes, there is at least a stronger chance that these are causally related.

The *Home Internationals Project* attempted such comparisons. For example it found higher levels of social segregation, wider variation in school value-added and wider social inequalities in attainment in England, where school policies emphasised diversity, than in the more uniform comprehensive systems of Scotland and Wales (Croxford 2001). However the project only had data on a single cohort. It could not confidently attribute the differences in outcomes to differences in policy.

The current *Education and Youth Transitions Project* addresses the problems of inferring cause and effect by studying comparative change. For example, policies for comprehensive schooling not only differed, they also diverged during the 1980s and 1990s, with an increasing emphasis on diversity in England but not in Scotland and Wales. The EYT project is examining whether these divergent policy trends are reflected in divergent outcomes in attainment and inequality at 16.

Even comparisons over time may not yield simple conclusions. In the first place, outcomes may diverge because of the different dynamics of change within each country (as described above) rather than because of divergent policies. Second, the effect of policy discourses and strategies on the social relations of education is mediated by changes in the administrative systems (see Figure 1). For example policies for

secondary school organisation and diversity have had variable impact on actual practice across (and within) the home countries, with variable time lags. Third, the relations are complex and a sample of just four home countries does not provide many degrees of freedom with which to analyse them.

The answer to these limitations is to see home international comparisons as much broader in style and purpose than simple quasi-experimental comparisons. Policy learning is much more than mere policy borrowing or the identification of 'what policy works'. Home international comparisons can support a broader understanding and awareness of the conceptual and practical issues in policy development and implementation, through detailed comparisons of policies in context.

An example is a recent comparison of Higher Still and Curriculum 2000 which informed our understanding of the purposes and strategies of the respective reforms, the management of change and such issues as the delivery of core skills, assessment, progression and the status of vocational learning (Hodgson *et al.* 2004).

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Other relevant Briefings

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- Raffe, D. (2000) 'Home International' Comparisons of Post-16 Education and Training. *CES Briefing No 18*.

About the studies

The Education and Youth Transitions project (ESRC R000239852) is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council from 2003-2006. It is analysing youth cohort survey data from 1984 to 2002 for England, Wales and Scotland, with a particular focus on attainment at 16, post-16 transitions, youth training and entry to higher education. Other strands of the project review policies and develop conceptual frameworks for home international comparisons. The project on *Establishing a UK 'home international' comparative research programme for post-compulsory learning* was funded by the Learning and Skills Development Agency and its Welsh, Northern Irish and Scottish partner organisations, in 2004. It reviewed policy and research documents and interviewed key informants in the four home countries and overseas, in order to develop proposals for a programme of home international comparative research on post-compulsory learning. The report will be published by the LSDA (Byrne and Raffe 2005).

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