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LEARNING FROM 'HOME INTERNATIONAL' COMPARISONS: 14-19 CURRICULUM AND QUALIFICATIONS REFORM IN ENGLAND, SCOTLAND AND WALES

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This paper draws on recent CES research to discuss the potential contribution to policy learning of 'home international' comparisons of the UK's education systems. [1]

England, Scotland and Wales have similar policy objectives for 14-19 education and training. They all aim to increase participation and attainment, especially in basic and core skills, to stretch the most able and to combat disaffection and disengagement. They all aim to develop a more coherent framework of opportunities which caters for young people of all abilities, backgrounds and interests, provides more choice (especially of vocational options at 14) and facilitates flexible progression. They all aim to reduce the assessment burden, to encourage collaboration among providers and to strengthen vocational learning, including apprenticeship.

They are pursuing these objectives through contrasting strategies and measures. After a brief flirtation with a unified framework, English is pursing a twin-track model, but with 'linkages' between the tracks. Wales is developing a unified framework of 14-19 Pathways. Scotland introduced a unified system of academic and vocational post-16 learning in 1999. Both England and Wales incorporate baccalaureate-type qualifications within their proposed frameworks: England will introduce a general GCSE Diploma and a system of vocational Diplomas; the Welsh Pathways will incorporate the Welsh Baccalaureate qualification which, unlike the English Diplomas, covers academic and vocational pathways. Both countries aim to balance baccalaureate principles with those of a 'climbing frame' model which emphasises flexible progression and multiple entry and exit points. This balance is particularly important as both countries seek to overcome the barriers to flexible progression associated with the 16 year-old age threshold. In Scotland, by contrast, the unified system is a climbing-frame model

[1] This paper is a product of the ESRC project on *Education and Youth Transitions* (R000239852) which addresses comparative change in England, Scotland and Wales. The argument can be extended to include Northern Ireland, with its pupil entitlement framework and supporting arrangements for institutional collaboration.

- attempts to superimpose a national system of group awards did not take root - and it primarily concerns the 16-plus age group (but with no upper age limit). However, there are pressures to extend this system down the age range, as schools use the new National Qualifications designed for 16-plus to increase choice, flexibility and progression from 14 years, and new Skills for Work qualifications for 14-16s will be based on the same curriculum model. The current Curriculum Review aims to establish a more coherent framework for progression from 3 to 18.

England and Wales aim to incorporate apprenticeships and other work-based learning within their 14-19 arrangements; in Scotland they remain separate. England is committed to 'apprenticeships for all'; Wales and Scotland continue to distinguish apprenticeship from other work-based provision.

There are numerous more detailed policy differences, for example in curriculum arrangements and in the measures being used to encourage school-college collaboration.

Different dynamics of change are emerging in each country. The home countries are diverging with respect to the structure and roles of central, local and regional government, and the arrangements for planning, funding, regulating and quality-assuring learning. Partly as a result, policy agendas are constructed in different ways. Only in England and Wales is there a specific 14-19 agenda; in Scotland 14-19 learning is split between different government departments and different systems of governance: similar issues arise but as part of different agendas. This division of responsibilities may obstruct further progress in what has hitherto been an evolutionary and incremental process of change.

The nature of this evolutionary process has also differed across the countries. The sequence in which issues have been addressed has varied. The current policy sequence in Scotland is often traced to the Action Plan of 1983, which began the process of establishing a standardised architecture of credit-bearing units and courses for post-16 learning. Had England possessed such a structure the work of the Tomlinson Working Group would have been much easier, and the longer-term outcome might have been different. There is divergence in the ways that policies are made and implemented, especially as the devolved administrations follow different strategies for involving civil society. The political processes which led to Higher Still, A Curriculum for Excellence and other current policy agendas in Scotland is very different from the process which generated the 14-19 Pathways in Wales. Both processes are somewhat more linear than those which moved England from the Dearing Review, through Curriculum 2000, Green and White Papers and the Tomlinson Report to the February 2005 White Paper. In Wales the dynamics of change are constrained by the absence of a separate Welsh qualifications system; compared with England and Scotland the Welsh Pathways are more 'process-based' and rely less on qualifications as a driver of change, although the role and scope of the Welsh Baccalaureate may expand to fill this gap.

Systematic comparisons of these differences are a potential source of policy learning. 'Home international' comparisons of the UK education systems are not fundamentally different from other cross-national comparisons, and they can serve the same range of purposes. The differences are of degree rather than of kind, and they reflect three things: the stronger relations of interdependence between the home countries, the greater similarity of their education systems, and the greater similarity of their social, cultural and labour-market contexts. As a result, they may provide more transferable lessons for policy and practice

(especially given the similarity of policy objectives described above). It is harder to draw such lessons from comparisons with overseas countries because of wide differences in the education and training systems and their social, economic and cultural environments. The 'other things' are not 'equal'. Such contextual differences are smaller among the home countries, and home international comparisons may therefore be particularly valuable as a source of policy learning.[2]

The policy learning that may occur is broader than mere 'policy borrowing'. Even within the UK policies can rarely be copied directly from one home country to another. They need to be studied in context and it is the lessons from their experience rather than the policies themselves which are transferable. These lessons often consist of a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding policy problems, rather than a simple repertoire of effective policy responses.

Home international comparisons can support several kinds of policy learning. They can:

- *help us to understand our own system better*. They can alert us to potential strengths on which current reforms should build, such as the tradition of local innovation in England or the clear and distinctive missions of schools and colleges in Scotland. They can alert us to weaknesses, such as the barriers to progression within English 14-19 education or the vulnerability of the Scottish system to academic drift. They can challenge misconceptions - for example, that vocational education has particularly low status in England because its education system developed along social class lines. (In Scotland, whose education system developed along more inclusive and national lines, vocational learning has *lower* status at 16-plus than in England: Raffe *et al.* 2001a.) As this example illustrates they can help to challenge the assumption of 'English exceptionalism' and the deficit model of policy-making that results.
- *clarify alternative policy strategies*. For example, in the 1990s the Unified Learning Project developed a conceptual framework which clarified the different UK strategies for bringing together academic and vocational learning, and identified possible implications of following each strategy (Spours *et al.*1990). Anglo-Scottish comparisons influenced the Tomlinson Working Group's aim to achieve 'an appropriate balance of "climbing frame" and baccalaureate-type characteristics'.
- *compare the impact of alternative policy strategies*. The policy divergence summarised at the beginning of this paper means that the UK may soon provide a natural laboratory in which to compare contrasting 14-19 strategies. The Home Internationals Project has already tried to use comparisons for this purpose. It used youth cohort data for the early 1990s to asses the impact of policy differences in school organisation and in post-16 education and training (eg Croxford 2001, Raffe *et al.* 2001a); the current Education and Youth Transitions Project aims to achieve stronger evidence of cause and effect by studying comparative change. Home international comparisons can also remind us that education policies may be relatively powerless to influence common 'British' problems whose main sources lie outside the education system. For example, the problem of low participation in post-compulsory education is British-wide. Contrary to common belief, Scotland's more flexible course structure has not encouraged consistently higher participation (Raffe *et al*. 2001b).

[2] This rationale is presented in more detail by Raffe *et al.* (1999) and Byrne and Raffe (2004).

- *help us to understand policy issues by observing greater variation*. Home international comparisons enable us to understand the practical issues in addressing common policy concerns by studying a variety of contrasting policy approaches and observing how similar approaches work in different contexts. This involves studying policy variation within, as well as between, each country. For example, the home countries share a range of experience of the delivery of core/key skills based on varying approaches (discrete, integrated, embedded), with varying certification arrangements and varying incentives to learners and providers (Hodgson *et al.* 2004). It may also involve examining past policies as well as current ones. For example, the Framework for Achievement might learn as much from the Scottish experience of unitisation in the 1980s as from the Scottish and Welsh credit frameworks today.
- *help us to understand the processes of educational change*. The comparison of Curriculum 2000 and Higher Still drew lessons for the process of change which are relevant to current 14-19 developments: the need for time for consultation and development; the need to agree long-term goals even if the process of achieving them is incremental; the need to anticipate conflicts inherent in the design of any unified system; the lessons from the fact that both reforms led to exams crises; and so on (Hodgson *et al.* 2004).

These kinds of policy learning are not encouraged by routine exchanges among policy-makers. Policy-makers acknowledge the value of 'home international' comparisons. But the influence of such comparisons on policy-making - before and since devolution - is slight and not typically based on systematic comparisons (Raffe 1998, Byrne and Raffe 2004). This partly reflects the familiar problems (such as different time scales) of linking policy and research. But it may also reflect the nature of current policy exchanges across the home countries.

I distinguish mutual influence from mutual learning. Mutual influence is inevitable given the interdependence of the home countries and the need for policy exchanges and policy coordination. The same occupational standards apply throughout the UK; England, Wales, Northern Ireland and (to a lesser extent) Scotland use the same qualifications; there are mutual flows of learners and teachers; there is an integrated UK labour market and employers and other stakeholders demand common UK-wide arrangements; there is a need to share the costs of policy development. Each home country's policies must 'join up' with reserved policy areas such as employment and social security, and so on. And policy discourses cross boundaries within the UK as well as globally; new ideas and developments in one home country, especially England, may soon appear in policy agendas elsewhere.

However such mutual influence could be independent of any mutual learning from home international comparisons. Mutual exchanges among the UK administrations focus on policy coordination, on smoothing out differences rather than learning from them. They focus on planning policies for the future rather than examining the effects of past policies. When policy-makers attempt to learn from elsewhere, this is often interpreted as policy borrowing rather than the broader types of learning described above. Finally, the unequal relationships among the four administrations, and the complex 'politics of similarity and difference' within each home country, inhibit objective comparison and policy learning.

Policy learning requires systematic comparisons and models of knowledge transfer suited to the types of learning that occur. The types of learning that are gained through home international comparisons cannot easily be expressed in a few bullet points, or even on a few sides of A4. Hence my difficulty in summarising them in this paper. They therefore require a non-linear model of knowledge transfer which involves frequent interactions and overlap between (comparative) research and policy. The Nuffield Review and the Tomlinson Working Group, with its sub-groups and networks, may be examples.

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