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Abstract

This article takes as its starting point David Raffe's pioneering work on 'home international' comparisons across the UK, and compares and contrasts current and emerging English and Scottish developments and policy trajectories primarily as they relate to vocational education broadly defined, but also with some observations concerning schooling and higher education (HE).

Keywords – home internationals, Scotland, England, divergent trends

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Introduction

One of David Raffe's abiding enthusiasms was for 'home international' comparisons of policy and practice across the four UK nations (Raffe, 1991; Raffe and Byrne, 2005). This approach has been taken up by a number of researchers (Lodge and Schmuecker, 2010; Hodgson, Spours and Waring, 2011; Hodgson and Spours, 2016a, 2016b; Furlong and Lunt, 2016), and this article follows in that tradition. It draws upon the author's project (with the Association of Colleges) for the FE Trust for Leadership on devolution of the Adult Skills Budget (Keep, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a), research undertaken for the Omani government on skills policies in Scotland, and the author's past membership of the Scottish Funding Council/Skills Development Scotland (SFC/SDS) Joint Skills Committee, as well as on-going work on UK skills policy formation. In an article of this length, the focus is on providing a broad-brush picture rather than a detailed evaluation of all the different institutional and policy developments.

Different roads, different destinations??

It is apparent, both to the casual observer and academic analysis (see, for example, Lowe and Gayle, 2011; Arnott and Ozga, 2016; and Hodgson and Spours 2016a, 2016b) that English and Scottish education and training (E&T) policies are increasingly differentiated, and aim to achieve distinctive national goals via policies and institutional approaches that are becoming more divergent.. Simply observing, noting and appreciating this cross-national difference (the dimensions of which will be

explored further below) is important, but so too is providing some explanation for why two countries that share a great deal in common, including a labour market regulation regime and large firms that span all four UK nations, have chosen to head in such radically divergent directions. As Paun, Rutter and Nicholl (2016, 13) observe: 'the four parts of the UK are much more similar to each other in terms of wider culture and institutional context than they are to any other country'.

Underlying the lack of commonality in England and Scotland's choice of E&T policy ends and the routes thereunto, are fundamentally divergent ideological and analytical backdrops against which skills policy is framed and thereby conceived. To put it another way, 'governments are....divided by ends as well as means' (Paun, Rutter and Nicholl, 2016, 11). There are two key schisms. The first centres upon the overall aims of policy, and how and why it is supposed to generate the desired outcomes. The second relates to choices concerning the best means of delivering these policy goals.

The aims of policy – different ways of conceptualising and framing policy ambition

In England, skills policy broadly defined remains firmly centred on the longstanding policy objectives of increasing levels of achievement, and growing the supply of skills to the labour market (Keep, 2006; Keep, Mayhew and Payne, 2006; Keep and Mayhew, 2010). The traditional assumption that a more highly skilled workforce will more or less automatically lead to higher productivity and wages, and improved international competitiveness still holds good within government. This policy stance faces two major challenges.

First, traditional supply-led models function best when government is able to allocate increasing public funding to support the expansion of provision that policy demands. This is no longer the case in England, and as a result, government is urgently trying to shift more of the costs onto learners (via extension of the student loans system to cover post-19 further education) and employers (via the new apprenticeship levy).

Second, traditional supply side skills policy is being undermined by mounting evidence of major skills mismatches, growing levels of over-qualification and poor skills utilisation, and a worrying lack of payoff from higher skill levels in terms of the expected increase in wages or improved hourly productivity (OECD, 2014; DfE, 2016; McGregor, McTier, and Sutherland, 2016; Keep and Mayhew, 2010, 2014). At the same time, international bodies such as the OECD (2012) and governments in other developed countries, for example Singapore, have been moving away from a simple supply-led policy narrative (see Keep, 2017). As the European Union's vocational education and training research centre (CEDEFOP) recently noted:

Skill formation is one of the main pillars of the European strategy for economic growth, EU2020. However, skills per se are not a source of growth; abundant and better skills can help the EU recover and sustain growth only if they are put to work. Skills are embodied in people. They manifest into productivity and innovation when they are deployed by workers in the execution of tasks. It follows that reaping the benefits of states', businesses' and individuals' investment in skills can only be realised when people are in jobs that make good use of their skills; when this happens, skills can be the root of economic growth....Put differently, if skills are a necessary condition for growth, they are not sufficient by themselves. The next step is to create and design jobs that make the most of workers' skills".

In Scotland, these issues are much more visible within policy than they are in England. Although more and better E&T outcomes remain a priority, the backdrop against which this is being attempted is much more nuanced and ambitious than that found South of the border and has embraced precisely those issues raised in the above quote. Since 2007 Scotland's economic and skills strategies (Scottish Government, 2007) have acknowledged that simply supplying more skills is not enough, and that greater attention must be paid to boosting underlying levels of demand for skill within the economy, and to ensuring that skills are productively deployed to maximum effect within the workplace (Keep, 2014). Recent policy developments have strengthened and reinforced this approach to framing E&T policy. First, the Scottish Government's updated economic strategy stressed the importance of achieving inclusive growth, and secondly Scotland has been evolving a new approach to labour market and employment policies. In 2014 the Scottish Government asked John Mather (a businessman and ex-SNP cabinet member) to chair a Working Together Committee to look into labour relations and employment issues in the wake of a high profile labour dispute at the Grangemouth petrochemicals plant. The Committee's report identified a range of problems and suggests the establishment of a Fair Work Convention to investigate solutions. The Fair Work Convention, which included the social partners, representatives of government and civil society, as well as academics, reported in 2016 with a *Fair Work Framework* (Scottish Government, 2016a). This established five over-arching policy objectives:

1. A skilled and productive workforce capable of meeting the needs of employers
2. Equality of opportunity to enter employment and progress within it
3. Decent, well-paid jobs that improve well-being and quality of life
4. A low unemployment, high employment economy
5. Successful businesses that boost national competitiveness

The government's response came in the shape of the *Scotland's Labour Market Strategy* (Scottish Government, 2016b) which proposed what is, by UK standards, a radical vision for a new kind of approach to labour market policy. It draws together improving wage levels and reducing pay inequality; improving job quality; addressing Taylorist and narrow forms of low discretion work organisation, job design and skill utilisation; increasing employee 'voice' within the organisation that employs them; improving levels of hourly productivity; and encouraging much greater workplace innovation. Its ambitions are substantially greater than anything that is currently being contemplated in England, and its intention to concert different strands of labour market and employment policy into a more coherent and inter-related whole means that it offers a level of sophistication hitherto almost wholly absent South of the border (Sisson, 2016).

Early first steps in the delivery of the Labour Market Strategy include:

- A Manufacturing Action Plan, supported by an advice and business support service
- A Productivity Action Plan for the food and drink sector as a means to trial how the different factors that drive productivity enhancement can be brought together and addressed in a single package of policies and activities at sector level
- Scottish Enterprise (the main national economic development agency) is establishing a new workplace innovation service to help firms to embrace and develop workplace innovation

- Scottish Enterprise will also run three sectoral pilots on productivity within specific localities, with work in the digital industries (Edinburgh), health (the rural Highlands), and manufacturing (West of Scotland).
- A new national workplace innovation research centre - FITWork – has been established at Strathclyde University

This provides a fresh context within which to design and enact skills policies, and it re-introduces, after an earlier bout of policy experimentation (Keep, 2014), a focus on workplaces that can deploy skills to maximum benefit to both the firm and the worker, not least in terms of linking skills to workplace innovation policies (Findlay and Warhurst, 2012; Keep, 2016c). Thus, in contrast to England, Scotland's skills policy acknowledges the need to combine upskilling with efforts to change the nature and design of jobs and work organisation, and for business support mechanisms that can help organisations move towards 'high road' competitive strategies and enable the adoption of bottom-up forms of workplace innovation (Keep, 2016c). Having reached this stage of understanding and of the evolution of a different model of what skills policy is intended to deliver, the underlying rationale for Scottish E&T policy seems liable to almost inevitably part company with that in England which remains rooted in a simple 'build and they will come' model of human capital stock maximisation that remains almost wholly disconnected from underlying structural issues within the labour market. This is, in part, because England lacks any wider employment or labour market strategy that would establish a supportive context for a more integrated approach to skills and employment.

In essence, the two countries' models of E&T policy are set on fundamentally different trajectories because they are founded upon models of how skills and knowledge interact with other features of the economy and labour market that offer radically different readings of what policy should look like. Scotland's understanding is substantially more advanced than England's.

The means to the ends – market or system?

Although there is still a widespread tendency in both countries for policymakers and commentators to talk about an education or skills 'system', in reality this terminology now only correctly applies North of the border. Scotland has retained the notion of educational provision organised as a set of linked systems covering different levels and types of provision that, taken together, form something that can be conceived of as a loosely coupled national E&T 'system'. In England, what was a creeping marketisation of education, training and skills policy under New Labour and Coalition governments (Ball, 2013), became under the Conservative administration a more overt shift towards the organising principle of market or quasi-market 'spaces' covering different tiers of education and training provision. As a result, talking about a system in England is now increasingly difficult and potentially redundant.

As Ball (2013) and others (Keep and Mayhew, 2010) have argued, the growing dominance of economics-based models for conceptualising and then managing public policy and the services it superintends, means that the English policy discourse is one where markets and competition between providers for students and funding rule in a way that they do not in Scottish debates. Table 1 (below) illustrates this national divide:

Table 1. Markets versus systems in the organisation and funding of English and Scottish E&T

AREA OF PROVISION	ENGLAND	SCOTLAND
Early years	market	system
Primary schooling	market	system
Secondary schooling	market	system
16-19 vocational (FE)	market	system
Qualifications	market	system
Apprenticeship	market	mixture of system and market
Post-19 vocational L3 and above	market (loans)	system
Post-19 devolved skills funding	local systems?	system
Higher education	market (loans)	system (block grant)

The discourse around the marketisation of E&T has gradually shifted in a way that means that mainstream English policy advocacy now produces ideological standpoints and arguments that it is unlikely would be heard (or if heard taken seriously) in Scotland. To give one example, the Free Enterprise Group of Conservative MPs published a report in 2015 entitled *Towards 2025* which argued:

We live in a country where we allow people to make very good money for running a chain of restaurants or hotels, but not for running a chain of schools. We need to stop undervaluing those who have the skills and expertise to ensure that our children are numerate, literate and ready for adult life...we need to allow the profit motive to ensure real lift off"

(Kwarteng, 2015, 11)

Lest this be thought the work of a small fringe organisation, it is worth noting that the Free Enterprise Group numbers 41 Members of Parliament among its supporters, and these include several who hold or have held ministerial positions, including Liz Truss, Sajid Javid, Mathew Hancock, Priti Patel, and Andrea Leadsom.

Elements of convergence around central government control

There are some points of convergence or at least parallel developments in some aspects of policy across England and Scotland. Thus, whether opting for market or system, both governments are being driven towards a further strengthening of central government and/or ministerial control. In England, this produces a rhetoric that stresses the primacy of markets and the superiority of patterns of provision driven by institutional/provider competition and parental or student choice (DBIS, 2015), but which generally quietly ignores the fact that marketisation does not necessarily

mean any letting go by central government of the power to intervene in, or specify priorities for outcomes within that market (see Morgan, 2016).

It is also the case that over time in England most forms of local control over education provision has been weakened to vanishing point (Bash and Coulby, 1989; Ball, 2013), and although there is now much discussion of the virtues of devolution, the reality, at least as it relates to skills issues, suggest that any re-balancing of power between central government and localities remains a long way off (Keep, 2016a). The only major element of funding that is being devolved (to Local Enterprise Partnerships and Combined Authorities) is the Adult Skills Budget (ASB), and this represents just 2.3 per cent of the government's overall annual spend on education and training and much of it is supposed to be earmarked to meet national learning entitlements. It can be argued that the main thing that is in fact being devolved is the need to make hard choices about where to spend a sum of money that is significantly exceeded by the range and scale of potential calls upon it (Keep, 2016a).

In Scotland, the desire for extending the reach of government direction and potentially control was made manifest via a review of the two enterprise agencies, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) that brought the intention to create a single, over-arching national funding board for all four organisations that would oversee all post-16 learning as well as economic development, business support and innovation policy (Scottish Government, 2016c). This provoked considerable controversy, and the upshot is that although there will be an over-arching board, the four organisations will also retain their own, independent boards (They Work for You, 2017).

These developments arguably reflects the spread of a belief, deeply-engrained in the UK version of New Public Management theory, that the only way to maximise policy impact and drive change is for the minister to act as a hands-on manager because ministers and their advisors possess skills and have access to knowledge or a 'vision' unavailable to others. At the same time, the tide of top-down direction continues to flow across the UK, in part, because education and skills remain one of the few levers that are perceived to be available to government in seeking to tackle a wide range of social and economic ills (Keep, 2006; Keep and Mayhew, 2010). That said, the intended purposes of these reforms are very different as between England and Scotland. In Scotland, the objective is an integrated business support and skills system to deliver a 'step change' in productivity. In England, it is largely to extend a government-designed marketplace for E&T.

It is also important to note that while these tendencies are at work in both countries, England is far further down this road, and the gradual reduction in autonomy and capacity that has attended each successive round of institutional reform of government agencies, for example, when the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) was replaced by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA), has meant that English intermediary bodies in the E&T field are usually ciphers or hollowed-out administrative organisations that lack any real measure of autonomy or expertise (Keep, 2006, 2011). By contrast, Scotland at present still retains a traditional funding council for higher and further education (whereas England is moving to a much narrower model of a market regulator – the Office for Students), a fully-fledged qualifications authority (whereas England has only a qualification market regulator – Ofqual), and local authorities that still have major roles to play in schooling and economic planning activities that impinge on how the college sector plans its activities. Moreover, as Hodgson and Spours (2016a) note, Scottish governance systems retain an active role for social partners and the actual providers

of E&T that is now almost entirely absent in England. In other words, Scotland has a significant distance to travel before it catches up with the degree of centralisation that characterises English E&T.

Reform, reform, reform

The other element of commonality across the two countries (and indeed across all four UK nations) is the perceived need for ongoing programmes of E&T reform. In England, current changes include a root and branch review of vocational qualifications to create 15 technical pathways (Sainsbury et al, 2016; DBIS, 2016), Area Based Reviews (ABRs) of FE provision to rationalise the range of public providers in any given locality and thereby stabilise their finances in the face of falling levels of public funding, the abolition of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and its replacement by a new market regulator, changes to the UK-wide structures for research funding, reform of almost every aspect of apprenticeship policy, and the re-introduction of grammar schools. In Scotland the scale and pace of change is more limited, but as the review of the SFC, SDS and the two enterprise agencies shows, ministers are as impatient as their English counterparts for results, and continue to believe that there is a magical policy and institutional combination that will deliver very significantly enhanced educational, social and economic outcomes within timescales dictated by the political cycle. Whether this belief has any foundation in reality is a topic worthy of debate.

A parting of the ways?

Once a sufficient degree of difference and of divergence in policy trajectories is reached, a logic of separation is liable to set in. Given a nationalist government in Holyrood that is committed to differentiating itself from England and which sees E&T as an element in national identity-building that can demonstrate the superiority of Scottish-designed solutions (Raffe, 1991), formulating and enacting policies that are distinctively different from England becomes an almost inevitable outcome (Ashton and Green, 1996; Arnott and Ozga, 2016), particularly in the absence of any countervailing unifying force or incentives to co-operate and concert policy developments. The UK government has, to date, shown almost no signs of wanting or of trying to create structures, processes or incentives within E&T policy that might entice the SNP government towards a more collaborative model of common approaches to shared challenges. Indeed, quite the opposite.

As Arnott and Ozga note, “the important point is that there is no serious attempt to re-design the constitutional arrangements of the UK in order to make something like a federal arrangement possible” (2016: 257), and the Institute for Government (IfG) have lamented the failure to develop mechanisms for gathering and sharing policy learning across the UK (Paun, Rutter and Nicholl, 2016). They argue that this is, in part, due to the increasing political difficulty of bridging learning across national administrations that are led by different political parties. As one of their respondents observed, ‘it is much easier to go and speak to your Swedish counterpart, who you are not in competition with’ (2016: 15).

Moreover, the UK government has shown a strong enthusiasm for acting unilaterally in the E&T policy sphere, with little apparent thought for the knock-on consequences for the other home nations. An example of this tendency was the UK government’s decision to close down the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. The UKCES was the only UK-wide body that existed to look at vocational skills and labour market issues, such as the supply of labour market information (LMI) and

forecasts of future skills needs, and research on topics such as youth transitions into the labour market, and besides being a form of social partnership body, with representatives from trade unions, employers and the third sector, it also possessed commissioners nominated by each of the UK nations. Its UK-wide remit was for example reflected by work on LMI that saw a unification of data gathering across the UK, with the devolved administrations buying in to a single set of UKCES surveys and forecasting systems. The UKCES also acted as a transmission mechanism for ideas and policy models across the whole of the UK (Keep, Payne and Rees, 2011).

The UK government's move to end funding for the Commission was taken without prior discussion with the other UK administrations, despite their being its co-sponsors. Both the Welsh and Scotland governments wrote formal letters of complaint to Whitehall protesting at this failure to consult. In the course of other activities, the author had occasion to discuss the decision to end the Commission with two of its commissioners, its ex-chief executive and a small number of UK government officials. A uniform story emerged as to why the Commission was abolished. There were two reasons. First, English officials and ministers found some of UKCES's research and policy development to be 'too independent' of mainstream UK government thinking, and it would appear that neither officials nor ministers welcome thinking occurring outside the Whitehall 'box' and its associated, long-established narrative about what skills policy is supposed to be comprised of (Keep, 2009, 2011). The second was that the Commission was seen as being 'too UK-oriented' and insufficiently English-centric in the focus of its activities. Given the organisation's title – the UK Commission – this is perhaps a strange stance to adopt, but it plainly played an important part in the organisation's demise.

Other examples of English unilateralism include the decision to cease core funding for Sector Skills Councils (SSCs), the abandonment of government support for the National Occupational Standards (NOS) that have hitherto underpinned the design and development of vocational qualifications across the UK, and reforms to quality assurance and research funding mechanisms in higher education (see Paun, Rutter and Nicholl 2016 for a critique of this from the perspective of the devolved administrations). The final example was the then-Chancellor's decision to introduce a UK-wide apprenticeship levy, again with no prior consultation with the devolved administrations. This was possible because the levy was regarded as a UK taxation measure, and therefore not a devolved policy issue.

Given this situation, is policy learning still possible? Policy learning and transfer requires a desire for sharing of experience and lessons learned, and also the capacity to facilitate such transfer. Neither seems to exist at present within England, which has decided on a stance of isolationism and unilateralism within the UK policy sphere (Paun, Rutter and Nicholl, 2016; Hodgson and Spours, 2016a), although interchange between the other three devolved administrations does still take place.

As things currently stand, the immediate future seems liable to witness an ever greater schism between England and Scotland on E&T policies – one that may still ultimately end in outright political divorce. The political, ideological and forces of national identity that are driving this split around what E&T policy is there to deliver and the best means to achieve these goals are very deep-seated and will not now easily be constrained by new institutional arrangements or a by change of attitude to co-operation and policy learning if this embraces only one of the two nations.

From a research standpoint, this situation offers significant opportunities to take David Raffe's work on home internationals to the next stage, with a focus on the 'policy laboratory' aspects of divergent political objectives, models and institutional arrangements (Raffe, 1991). Pursuit of fundamentally different approaches conducted within a broadly similar economy and labour market context provides the chance to compare and assess their relative successes and failures in ways that could generate far clearer lessons than comparisons with countries further away (Paun, Rutter and Nicholl, 2016). This operates at both a macro policy scale, in terms of societal level outcomes; but also at a more micro level in terms of, for example, the ability to engineer major qualifications reform with (in the case of Scotland) and without (in the case of England) a national qualifications authority. This suggests that there remains some space for educational civil society to learn lessons across the border, despite divergent national trajectories.

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