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FE and Skills – Is The ‘UK laboratory’ Open For Expansive Policy Learning?

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Special Issue – FE and Skills Across the UK

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Abstract

This article builds on the previous articles in this special issue to explore two related concepts –a ‘UK policy laboratory’ and ‘expansive policy learning’, with a specific focus on further education (FE) and skills. We argue that the potential for a UK policy laboratory in this area is based primarily on a new balance between the forces of convergence and divergence across the four countries of the UK. In this ‘goldilocks zone’ lie opportunities for policy learning. The methodology of the UK FE and Skills Inquiry, on which this article draws, attempted to model the conditions of the UK policy laboratory by involving a rich mix of social partners and highlighting the importance of national contexts and how these can inform differing approaches to common challenges. The Inquiry also identified ‘interesting practice’ that may form the basis of an initial ‘common project’ across the different systems. However, its pursuit will require shifts towards the more collaborative approach to FE and skills that characterises the three smaller countries of the UK. In this variegated political environment, we conclude by speculating on the wider conditions for the permanent development of a UK policy laboratory (or laboratories) and expansive forms of policy learning.

Key words: further education, skills, policy learning, UK policy laboratory, collaboration

UK Home International Comparisons and the Potential for Policy Learning

In the first article of this Special Issue we outlined the overarching question that informed the UK FE and Skills Inquiry as a whole:

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?

In this article we draw on all of the previous articles in the Special Issue to summarise our response to this question.

International comparison as a basis for policy development is often founded on the identification of a successful system or practice lodged in another country resulting from a very different set of conditions than the ones we experience here in the UK. Westminster politicians, for example, have often looked to Germanic systems for inspiration regarding vocational education and apprenticeship or, more recently, to Asiatic systems concerning examination performance and positioning in relation to PISA (Howse 2014).

By way of contrast, ‘home international comparisons’ across the four countries of the UK have been identified as a more practical source of policy learning because of the removal of the barrier of very different national contexts and conditions (e.g. Raffe 1991, 1998, Raffe et al. 1999, Raffe and Byrne 2005). Here we argue that FE and skills provides a useful case study for the enactment of a ‘UK policy laboratory’. By this we are referring to a set of conditions and challenges across the four countries that are sufficiently similar that might encourage them to develop a sense of common purpose but, at the same time, are sufficiently

different that lessons can be learnt from the ways in which problems are being approached in the various national contexts. Elsewhere, we have referred to this as the ‘Goldilocks Zone’ – not too similar but not too different – that provides the context for ‘home international comparison’; the conditions for the ‘UK policy laboratory’ and for what has been termed ‘expansive policy learning’ (Hodgson and Spours 2016). UK home international comparisons can also be of benefit because they are able to utilise existing and low-cost networks, although in many policy areas there has been the constant pressure of political differentiation and even competition (Paun, Rutter, and Nicholl 2016). This has worsened under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010-15) and Conservative (2015 -) Westminster Governments; leading to what has been referred to as ‘accelerated divergence’ (Hodgson and Spours 2016).

In this article we begin by commenting on the different policy approaches to FE and skills in the four countries of the UK and to what extent each of them might be interested in policy learning at this point in time. We follow this by a section that explores the new balances between convergence and divergence over the period since 2000, concluding that the conditions are now potentially favourable for a UK policy laboratory in this area. We then move to a discussion of expansive policy learning, noting that the UK FE and Skills Inquiry, which we briefly describe, modelled features of a UK policy laboratory and identified common challenges across the four countries as well as highlighting aspects of interesting practice. In doing so, we suggest that it is possible to see the seeds of a common project. We conclude by considering whether the UK policy laboratory is open for expansive policy learning around this common project and lay out some of the conditions for it to succeed.

The National Contexts – Different Lenses on Common Challenges

In the context of a relatively common economy and labour market across the UK, albeit with regional differences in economic activity, the four countries of the UK share certain aims in the field of technical and vocational education. All have well-established general education routes to university education, expansion of which may be reaching a limit in terms of their utility to the UK economy. Recent policy attention, therefore, has been increasingly focused on creating larger and more effective vocational and apprenticeship systems (e.g. HMG 2017). This overall policy objective, however, is being interpreted in different ways across the four countries of the UK.

England, the largest country and containing the Westminster Parliament, is the point of origin of policy on apprenticeships and vocational qualifications across the UK, including the Apprenticeship Levy (see DfE 2018). The aim of the Coalition and Conservative Governments has been to favour employers and particularly large employers as the principal agents of the vocational system rather than an alliance of social partners; to focus on the upper echelons of qualifications at Levels 3, 4 and 5 rather than the full spectrum of levels; and to continue to support marketized education provider relations, albeit now tempered with a mild language of collaboration. These policy emphases have been reflected in the new apprenticeships in England that are based on standards designed primarily by large employers and currently focused on the higher levels (HMG 2015a); the development of T Levels - full-time, sector-based, Level 3 technical programmes related to the apprenticeship standards (DBIS/DfE 2016); and a relatively permissive approach to further education college Area-

Based Reviews that allowed college governors to decide whether to accept recommendations for merger (HMG 2015b). Because many large employers, the major focus of the reforms in England, operate on a cross-UK basis, differing national approaches to areas of policy suggest the need for dialogue.

Scotland has always had a separate education system to England and that trajectory been emphasized since the election of an SNP-led administration in 2007. Its perspective on developing the vocational system is steered by the aim of sustainable economic growth; the idea of a ‘managed education and training system’; collaboration between different agencies and social partners through an overarching strategic board; a focus on youth employment and the learner journey; equity; and access to a linked FE and HE system (e.g. Scottish Government 2017, 2018). The Scottish credit and qualifications system (SCQF) remains a bedrock of post-compulsory education and training; colleges have been regionalised and apprenticeships are designed with both learners and employers in mind and with an emphasis on ladders of progression. Scotland has seen itself as an educational innovator and exporter of ideas, with longer-term strategic aims and an eye to the Nordic systems, so this raises the question of how far Scottish policy-makers have an appetite for policy learning from the other countries of the UK (see Gallacher and Reeves in this issue for a more detailed discussion).

Wales, through its Welsh Assembly Government, has been following an increasingly distinctive path (from England) following democratic devolution in 1999 (see James, this Special Issue for more detail). It sees itself as a small country battling the legacies of deindustrialization and economic disadvantage through the formation of an explicit political identity and a philosophy of social inclusion, equity and fairness (e.g. Welsh Government

2018). The area of post-compulsory education and skills has now reached a phase of fundamental review with the aim of creating a fully integrated post-16 skills system that embraces school sixth forms, FE, HE and work-based learning (Hazelkorn 2016). A review phase of development could arguably create a motive for wanting to examine how other countries are addressing post-16 education and training co-ordination.

Policy-makers in Northern Ireland see the region as a post-conflict society that has recently been caught in a political stalemate. It is currently without a functioning government since the collapse of the devolved administration in 2017. This has put senior civil servants in the driving seat, although working in constraining circumstances. While policy-making progresses slowly, nevertheless a distinctive approach has been emerging with the development of a comprehensive policy framework covering relations with employers, the organisation of FE and an entitlement-based 14-19 phase (e.g. DEL 2010, DfE 2016). Like Wales, Northern Ireland has not adopted recent English reforms in general education in a wholesale fashion, but has approached these with its own regional aims and a willingness to retain measures inherited from the New Labour era. At the same time, Northern Ireland policy-makers remain mindful of inter-dependencies; of having many of their young people entering English higher education and thus not wanting to stray too far from Westminster-inspired reforms (see Irwin in this Special Issue for more detail). This would suggest an appetite for policy dialogue and exchange.

The policy lenses of the four countries of the UK are thus varied – England remains dominant, but increasingly cannot have its writ enacted across the UK; Scotland takes a strong independent position and sees itself as an exporter of its own innovations, such as the SCQF; Wales is finding its own social democratic voice as it battles economic and social

challenges; and Northern Ireland is becoming a distinctive region that is less tied to England but has to balance this relationship, due not only to its small size but also its labyrinthine politics.

New Balances Between Convergence and Divergence

Achieving the right kind of proportion or balance between commonality and difference, an important pre-condition for policy learning, has been fundamentally affected by the political and institutional processes of convergence and divergence between the four countries or, more precisely, between the three smaller countries of the UK and England, including Westminster.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the period that straddled democratic devolution, the value of ‘home international comparison’ was recognized as a valuable source for policy learning.

According to Raffe et al. (1999), this was on account of its potential contribution to theoretical debates; the appreciation of specific differences among the four UK systems; the practical value of home international comparisons in terms of reflections on ‘good’ policy and practice; the potential for policy learning under particular circumstances; and the relative ease of conducting this activity.

Taking advantages of opportunities for policy learning would, however, be based on the balance of shared and different system features – referred to as system convergence and divergence. The sharing dimension included ‘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’ when compared with countries

outside the UK (Raffe and Byrne 2005: 1). The degrees of difference, on the other hand, arose from divergence ‘with respect to the structure and roles of central, local and regional government, and the arrangements for planning, funding, regulating and quality-assuring learning’ (2). In the field of post-compulsory education, the four countries had relatively common aims – ‘increasing participation and attainment, especially in basic and core skills, to stretch the most able and to combat disaffection and disengagement’ (1), but differing policies and measures that arose from the evolving processes of democratic devolution (Raffe 2005). Canning and Martin (2002), reflecting on divergence in vocational education across the UK in the 1990s and early 2000s, also pointed to the significance of divergence in system structure as well as in policy. Overlaying these policy and system features has been a changing wider political climate that has affected the degree to which the differing Administrations have possessed the political will for greater mutual understanding (Raffe and Spours 2007).

In the context of the New Labour Administration (1997-2010), these processes were understood as ‘constrained divergence’ insofar as pressures for divergence were balanced by those for convergence (Gallacher and Raffe 2011). These balances were disrupted, however, by the election of a Conservative-led Coalition Government (2010-2015) and the implementation of what has been referred to as an ‘extreme Anglo Saxon’ model in the field of education resulting from reforms to the curriculum and school structures (Hodgson and Spours 2014). Constrained divergence thus gave way to ‘accelerated divergence’, focused in particular on the area of 14-19 general education. It quickly became apparent that the three smaller countries of the UK were following general education and its assessment that were very different from the reforms in England. In the context of accelerated divergence, Scotland continued to follow its own distinctive path while Wales and Northern Ireland, on

the other hand, sought to retain qualifications and regulatory frameworks from the New Labour era (Hodgson and Spours 2016).

In terms of the conditions required for the 'UK policy laboratory', the context of accelerated divergence produced a climate that failed to inspire significant interest in any form of policy learning, at least involving England. Instead, policy-makers in the four countries looked to differing global models of education for international inspiration. The three smaller countries began to look towards the Nordic systems, whereas the Department for Education in England saw countries in the Far East as sources of inspiration (Hodgson and Spours 2016).

Had these conditions pertained in relation to all aspects of education and training, it is hard to imagine that the UK FE and Skills Inquiry discussed in this Special Issue would have got off the ground in the way it did. But the conditions surrounding this area were somewhat distinctive in the wider landscape of educational policy and so was the evolving wider political environment. While the differences regarding general education were in the broadest sense ideological, the commonalities in vocational education and training were primarily economic. The four countries of the UK share a broadly similar economy, particularly if London is taken out of the equation; increasing the quality and quantity of apprenticeships is an aspiration that spans the UK, although there are different policies regarding apprenticeship programmes and the use of the Apprenticeship Levy; independent training providers are a common feature in all four countries; and FE colleges across the UK not only support the development of technical and vocational skills, but also social and educational inclusion.

There were also facilitating shifts in the wider political environment and in the nature of Conservatism. The more highly marketized approach of the Conservative-led Coalition era

(2010-2015) gave way to the ‘soft economic nationalism’ of Prime Minister Theresa May’s Conservative Government (Pearce, 2016) that is now being fuelled by Brexit. These political shifts have impacted in particular on technical and vocational education because of a new emphasis on ‘home grown skills’. The dynamics of convergence and divergence that shaped the cross-UK differences in general education could be seen to be giving way to a new balance towards convergence in the sphere of FE and skills, thus providing potential conditions for the re-emergence of the ‘UK policy laboratory’.

The ‘UK Policy Laboratory’ and Conditions for ‘Expansive Policy Learning’

What do we mean by the term ‘laboratory’ in the context of home international comparison?

While the term has been used in differing ways in scientific and political settings, a laboratory is commonly conceived as an environment for reflection, experimentation and innovation that has relative autonomy from a wider system or the state. The concept of the UK policy laboratory is centred on the specific conditions that pertain to the four countries of the UK, their inter-relationships, commonalities and differences that are a potential source of learning, marking them out from other national systems that may follow different global models of education and have significantly different socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Mutual Influence and Mutual Learning

And what does it mean to participate in such a laboratory to engage in policy learning? Here a number of distinctions can be made. The first being the distinction between ‘mutual influence’ and ‘mutual learning’ (Raffe and Byrne 2005). Mutual influence can be based on the effects of inter-dependence and forces for convergence that involve exchanges between policy-makers around issues such as the co-ordination of qualifications, vocational programmes and training and employment standards, due to the flows of higher education

learners between the respective UK national systems and the common regulatory requirements in a UK-wide labour market. However, even these routine exchanges had started to collapse in the Coalition period (Hodgson and Spours 2016) and Paun, Rutter, and Nicholl (2016) recall that the Joint Ministerial Committee established to oversee relations between Westminster and the devolved administrations was a '*combination of either whinging or fighting or a beauty parade*' (17).

We suggest, like Raffe and Byrne, that mutual learning goes further than the structures and practices that support mutual influence, involving more reflective activity around an understanding of the influence of different contexts and different histories and how these might inform varied but possibly reciprocal ways of addressing common challenges, thus leading to new modes of shared thinking about policy and practice.

Participative Diversity

The concept of the UK laboratory has to involve a diversity of participants and not just policy-makers. This is important in several respects – different parties can bring a variety of specialisms and interests into the deliberative space, making it possible to innovate in theory and practice at different levels or scalars – from the classroom to the education system level. Moreover, this social diversity can strengthen the ethical content of deliberations, leading to a reduction in the level of political competition and greater attention being given to the common question or 'problem terrain'.

Within the laboratory environment, we also believe that there is a special role for research that engages in what Argyris (1976) referred to as 'double-loop' learning. Applied to the field of policy learning in education and training, double loop learning involves going beyond the 'rationalist model' of information exchanges around 'what works' and brings to bear a

greater range of knowledge – historical, contextual and comparative – that allows a questioning of the assumptions behind policy and the models employed (the double-loop part) and how these may have contributed to the erratic performance of policy (Raffe and Spours 2007).

In the UK policy laboratory, as there is a required diversity of participants, so there may be a diversity of ‘laboratory situations’. It is not predominantly a physical space and it may not be a single entity or moment. The ‘UK laboratory’ may thus refer to a variety of exchanges and learning situations that allow for deliberation and the systematic building of shared knowledge; going beyond the ‘ad hocery’ of cross-UK policy exchanges of recent years (Paun, Rutter, and Nicholl 2016).

Restrictive and Expansive Policy Learning

A well-established distinction has been made between policy borrowing and policy learning in the field of education (e.g. Philips and Ochs 2003, Raffe and Byrne 2005, Chakroun 2010, Lingard 2010). More recently, and building on the work of Fuller and Unwin in relation to apprenticeship (e.g. 2003, 2016a, 2016b), a further distinction has been made between ‘restrictive’ and ‘expansive’ policy learning that focuses on the ‘quality’ and ‘range’ of learning in the policy sphere (Hodgson and Spours 2016). The idea of a spectrum from restrictive to expansive is less dismissive of acts of policy borrowing, a common recourse of policy-makers, because these too could be regarded as a form of policy learning albeit a narrow one. Policy borrowing normally involves study of a particular practice or policy in another national environment with the hope of some sort of ‘policy transfer’ of ‘best practice’. But it is a potentially problematical form of learning because it often involves a pre-existing assumption as to what ‘best practice’ looks like and tends to underestimate the

effects of the wider environment in which the so-called best practice is found. These contribute to the problem of effective transfer. Borrowing as a restrictive form of policy learning could also serve to displace the more meticulous construction of the UK policy laboratory needed to support more 'expansive' forms of policy learning.

A UK policy laboratory that promotes expansive policy learning, on the other hand, requires a set of conditions and principles to thrive. The first and most obvious of these involves a willingness of all parties to recognize the potential of UK-wide policy learning that derives from the identification of common problems and knowledge of the differing political and governance perspectives as to how these might be resolved. The second is the recognition of the power of diversity through the opportunity for all voices to be heard and the strengths that different social partners bring to the deliberations. The third condition is also a dimension of diversity - an appreciation of the influence of differing national contexts rather than the assumption of cross-national uniformity. This sensitivity can lead to a fourth condition or capacity – the willingness to contemplate 'double loop learning' that allows for a questioning of the assumptions and aims that lie behind policy in the differing national contexts. Within the deliberative process, research should also assist with the ability to reflect on the past, the exercise of 'policy memory' (Higham and Yeomans 2007), as well as on the specificities of national contexts. As part of this, there has to be a willingness to explore and understand 'interesting' practice generated in these contexts, rather than indulging in the myth of 'best practice' and the possibility of its unproblematic transfer. Taken together, the factors for expansive policy learning suggest that participants are willing to listen to new and different perspectives on common issues and to contemplate the holistic and gradual reform of their respective systems in order to create the conditions in which the consideration of 'interesting practice' may be of benefit.

The Research Approach of the FE and Skills Inquiry - Modelling Features of the UK Policy Laboratory

Interestingly, and in contrast to the relative indifference of English policy-makers in home international comparison in relation to general education in the period 2010-2015, the inspiration for the FE and Skills Inquiry came from England. Funded by The Edge Foundation, the Department for Education in England and City and Guilds and involving a university in each of the four countries (UCL IOE in England, Glasgow Caledonian in Scotland, Cardiff University in Wales and the Ulster University in Northern Ireland), together with a special Adviser from Oxford University; the Inquiry attempted to model the conditions of the UK laboratory in its conception, design and research methodology.

The research process involved a series 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 context and FE and skills policy and practice. A further two were 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.

Each of the seminars involved a broad mix of social partners - researchers, policy-makers and practitioners - framed around the central research question focused on dimensions of policy learning. The proceedings were carefully noted and a briefing paper for each of the

nationally-based seminars was circulated to the respective country leads for comment and then to participants. Briefing papers articulated the specificities of the national contexts; the challenges arising and how the FE and skills systems had been shaped as a basis for understanding the significance of ‘interesting practice’ in each case. The seminar series concluded with suggestions for building a more permanent set of structures for policy learning across the UK. These are discussed towards the end of the article.

Common Challenges Across the Four Countries of the UK

As we have seen, the identification of common challenges is a critical feature of policy learning because these provide the basic motivation for the learning exercise. Throughout the seminar series discussions, a number of inter-related challenges for all four countries of the UK were identified that fall into different but related types. Arguably the most fundamental type is ‘system historical’. These challenges have arisen from the status and function of technical and vocational education in the UK that evolved as post-16 participation expanded from the 1980s onwards where general education predominated as the primary route to what would become a mass higher education sector. In this context vocational education and training became both subordinate and of lower status. Linked to this is the role of FE colleges as they try to balance the different missions that have arisen from their system historical position in the general education expansion and the relative absence of employers as active partners in the education and training system (Keep 2005). Another type of

challenge relates to governance and, in particular, the organisation of colleges to be able to support collaboration 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. Added to these is a set of challenges that could be referred to as 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 role of FE and skills and that make new pedagogic and professional demands. A final type 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.

The Role and Status of Technical and Vocational Education

Despite differences in the governance and the political orientations of the respective national educational systems, UK-wide educational cultural factors came to the fore. 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 their parents. The desire to take A Levels/Highers and to gain a place at a prestigious university is still driving behaviour across the UK 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. For FE and skills providers in all four countries this means that their institutions are often seen as ‘second best’ (see Hodgson et al. 2018).

Defining the Purposes and Functions of FE Colleges

Allied to the issue of the lower status of vocational education is the role and purposes of FE colleges. In all parts of the UK these institutions 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 in their locality - notably schools and universities in relation to general education and independent training providers regarding technical and vocational education. The 'reactive' role of FE colleges means that it is often difficult to define precisely their function and purpose, which further hampers their status and profile in public perception (Foster 2005, Hodgson, Bailey and Lucas 2015). Moreover, national policies in all countries have further muddied the water by demanding different priorities at different times. It appeared throughout the seminar series, however, that in all countries of the UK colleges' role in providing technical and vocational skills has been rising up government agendas in recent years. Nevertheless, this may not meet the range of demands of the communities in which colleges are located despite the fact that in Wales and Scotland, in particular, the issue of social inclusion and access to vocational provision is strongly emphasised in policy documents (see James, and Gallacher and Reeve in this special issue).

Reorganisation of FE and Skills

As FE colleges grapple with these multiple missions, in all four countries in the UK they have undergone reorganisation and merger over the past decade. Here there were important differences. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were guided by the process of regionalisation whereas in England colleges participated, somewhat later, in Area-Based Reviews. The English process emphasised the freedom of colleges to make the ultimate decision regarding merger, whereas in the other countries there has been more central steering with the provision of frameworks to guide college action (Spours et al. 2018)

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

Balancing Competition and Collaboration – The Role of Employers and Wider Social Partners

Historically, employers in the UK have not played the central role in the design and delivery of technical and vocational education and training that their counterparts have in other parts of Europe, such as Germany, Switzerland and Austria (Clarke and Winch 2007). While national 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 unsurprising that employer-college partnership building remains challenging and something that is often piecemeal and must be built systematically at the grassroots level. This is particularly the case in relation to small and medium-sized enterprises which predominate across the UK.

Moreover, 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 UK FE and Skills 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 learning, working and living. Becoming local anchor institutions and building ‘high progression and skills networks’, (see Hodgson and Spours in this special issue), it was suggested, requires greater collaboration and a reduction in unhelpful competition between providers. 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 and common difficulties of engaging employers in sustainable collaborative activity. This may be changing somewhat following Area-Based Reviews in England with a more pronounced role for combined authorities and regional government (Spours et al. 2018).

Growing Apprenticeships – How Far is This a Pressing UK-Wide Issue?

While each of the work-based routes in the respective countries have their differences, in contrast to the Germanic systems, apprenticeships in the UK appear to have a particular character that is linked to flexible labour markets rather than a social partnership model (Keep 2011).

One particular policy innovation, which moves away from this tradition, has been the development of the UK-wide Apprenticeship Levy (DfE 2018), giving rise to an important question about how the Apprenticeship Levy is being managed across the four nations to support the development and delivery of high-quality apprenticeships that meet employer expectations and raise productivity levels. The answer is ‘quite differently’. In Scotland and Wales, for example, there is an emphasis on providing a collective resource that can be accessed by employers not only to pay for apprenticeships but also for other forms of skills development (see James in this Special Issue). In Scotland there is also a focus on securing ‘fair work’ for young people (see Gallacher and Reeve in this Special Issue). In England, on

the other hand, the emphasis is on large employers recouping their levy contribution by developing apprenticeships. This suggests the existence of different philosophies behind apprenticeships. The situation in Northern Ireland, however, is complicated because although the Apprenticeship Levy is collected, due to the collapse of the devolved government at the time of writing, it is not distributed. A consultation on this subject is currently in abeyance and the arrangements for expenditure are not yet clearly defined (see Irwin in this Special Issue).

How Will FE and Skills Providers Rise to the Historic Big System Challenges?

The big ‘known unknowns’ foreshadowing the seminar series were the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Brexit – both potential disrupters of the existing order of skills supply and demand. FE and skills providers from each of the countries will be approaching these challenges from slightly different system positions and national traditions thus providing an opportunity for developing a new phase of the FE and Skills UK policy and practice laboratory.

A series of further related issues were also discussed, including:

- How far and in what ways are education providers and employers working together to move from what has been termed a ‘skills supply’ model to a ‘partnership-based co-production’ model (Hodgson et al. 2018)?
- How far is FE developing new pedagogies, such as project-based and digital learning to meet the challenges of complex socio-economic problems and rapid technological change?

- What can be learnt about how professional development and capacity building is undertaken in the different countries of the UK to develop a high quality and resilient FE and skills workforce for the future?
- What forms of leadership are required to meet the challenges facing the new larger college formations in a rapidly changing socio-economic context?
- Given the need to reskill and upskill the adult population, how can FE providers refocus on lifelong learning and adults in contrast to the current policy emphasis on young people?

As we will see in the subsequent section on ‘interesting practice’, developments that can potentially inform these questions can be found in colleges in all four countries of the UK.

Summary – Convergence Rooted in the Subordinate Position of FE and Skills Formation

It could be argued that the common challenges in FE and Skills systems across the UK appear primarily rooted in their subordinate position in relation to the dominance of general education and the status of academic qualifications and universities. Here, at least for now, UK-wide background cultural and historical factors appear to trump different approaches to governance affecting FE.

The seminar series explored ways of addressing this fundamental historical feature; pointing to a strengthening of the weak technical and vocational tradition in the UK; closer partnership working between FE providers, employers and other social partners in going beyond a ‘skills supply’ model; innovative approaches to the organisation of learning in the digital era; and a

far greater emphasis on the relationship between FE, HE and lifelong learning. These related strategies suggest an orientation towards a more co-ordinated FE and skills system rather than an open FE market (see Hodgson and Spours in this Special Issue). However, this latter observation marks a point at which convergence begins to break down, at least between the three smaller countries of the UK and England/Westminster. We explore this issue in the final part of the article.

‘Interesting Practice’ – The Makings of a ‘Common Project’?

As we have noted earlier, policy learning involves a study of ‘interesting practice’ related to the challenges of the national context rather than the transfer of supposedly ‘best practice’ from one national context to another as in policy borrowing. The seminar series, together with a set of visits to different sites of learning in each of the four countries, resulted in the identification of a range of interesting practice that may point to a common zone of innovation (for more detail see Hodgson et al. 2018).

Colleges, the Local Economy and Communities

Across all the countries of the UK, FE colleges are developing a more explicit area-oriented mission based on building relationships with local authorities, other FE and skills providers across a region and employers, thus acting as a bridge to the local economy. This economic and spatial function has been captured in the term ‘anchor institutions’ (Smallbone et al. 2015). An FE college, for example, can lead the transformation of regeneration areas by

developing an incubator function and offering a portfolio of programmes and services, including training, mentoring, business support initiatives, consultancy, student projects, student placements and strategic graduate programmes. The twin missions of FE colleges – supporting vocational specialization and social inclusion – are, in this way, played out across local, sub-regional and regional landscapes.

Developing Progression in the Work-Based Route for Young People

While everyone thinks that apprenticeships are important, policy approaches to them differ with Wales and Scotland developing them at the lower end and England at the upper end. In Wales, for example, Junior Apprenticeships are being developed for 14-18 year-olds, providing an alternative experience to school, a clear line of sight to work and the potential for better paid jobs. These are leading to a greater uptake of full apprenticeships. There is a similar initiative in Scotland around Foundation Apprenticeships. England, on the other hand, has showcased Degree Apprenticeships in key sectors (e.g. Aerospace and nuclear, Digital and Nursing) as an alternative track in HE. Emphasising different parts of a ladder of apprenticeships is not a mutually exclusive exercise if the process of progression is viewed holistically. The idea of progression within apprenticeships and the work-based route also points to the importance of another related area of interesting practice that emanates from Jersey - mentor coaches – who can support and track the progress of the young apprentice (Hodgson et al. 2018, 30-32).

Partnership Approaches to Learning and Innovation

Colleges in the different countries are increasingly recognising the importance of collaborative approaches to learning, problem-solving strategies and inter-disciplinary work linked to local companies that can embed a culture of entrepreneurship within colleges. Examples of this include Industry Academies in City of Glasgow College and collaboration

between Northern Ireland's six regional colleges in forming close ties with employers to support inter-disciplinary 'real life' projects. In Wales there has been the promotion of 'skills competitions' to bring together colleges, work-based learning providers and employers. While still in their infancy, these examples of collaborative approaches to innovative learning are going to become increasingly important given the demands of the 4th Industrial Revolution and any of the post-Brexit scenarios.

Governance, Policy and Co-ordination

Across the UK FE and skills is becoming more strategically co-ordinated, albeit from different historical and political trajectories. This is reflected, for example, in 'regional outcome agreements' in Scotland based on: the fundamental characteristics of a region; the key industries that colleges can support; widening participation and inclusion; and improving teaching and learning. In Wales there are 'policy partnerships' based on regional skills partnerships; commissioning of independent reviews and close policy networking between college leaders and political representatives. In England, following Area-Based Reviews, sub-regional skills and employment boards are being established to encourage collaboration and co-ordinated action around the skills and progression needs of an area. In Northern Ireland local agreements are more *ad hoc* by nature and less regulated than in the other countries.

The Concepts of Tertiary System and Lifelong Learning

In Scotland and Wales, serious efforts are being made to articulate FE and HE in support of social and economic development. This is gradually emerging as the idea of a 'tertiary system' linked to an emphasis on lifelong learning. In Scotland, Higher National Certificates

and Diplomas are being used as ‘articulators’ between FE and HE; and in Wales, the tertiary concept is part of a fundamental review of all post-16 provision (Hazelkorn 2016 and see James, this special issue). The ‘tertiary debate’, on the other hand, has yet to begin in England and Northern Ireland.

Towards a Common Zone of Innovation?

While these examples of interesting practice were discussed separately in the seminar series; on reflection they could helpfully be seen as linked. What could be emerging here is a possible zone of innovation for FE and skills that sits somewhere between a highly marketized system (England) and a highly regulated system (the Germanic example). In this more ‘socialised and co-ordinated’ space there could be the potential for greater collaboration between social partners; a comprehensive spatial focus on an area; and the contribution of a diversity of actors to constructing what has been referred to elsewhere as a ‘social ecosystem model’ (Hodgson and Spours 2018). In terms of FE and skills, such a model is designed to build an inclusive ladder of progression for young people from the lower to the higher parts of the education system with a focus on collaborative and inter-disciplinary approaches to learning within real world and specialised environments. It also importantly includes partnership with employers to co-design technical and vocational programmes and to encourage innovative working practices in the pursuit of inclusive economic development.

The identification of the potential of a common project, however, should not neglect the important differences between country contexts. At the root of these lie the twin challenge of governance and politics, focused around the degree or combination of institutional autonomy and central steering or management. In this regard, each of the countries may occupy a

different point on a continuum using differing combinations of drivers and incentives. Comparing the effects of these in itself could prove to be a useful vehicle for policy learning.

The UK Policy Laboratory and Conditions for Success

By way of a conclusion, we return to the title of the article and ask, ‘Is the UK Policy Laboratory open for expansive policy learning in the area of FE and skills?’ The answer is, ‘It depends on the conditions’. Here we consider three that are likely to be influential.

First, it is important to recognise that history suggests that the conditions for a UK Policy Laboratory have fluctuated over recent decades according to the degree of convergence and divergence. There are now more powerful forces for convergence in the area of FE and skills and these may be crystallising into a potential ‘common project’ focused around area-based partnership/collaboration, learning/work innovation and skills co-production.

Second, expansive policy learning is based on contributions from diverse social partners in a variety of positions or locations in state and civil society. The question, therefore, is how these different collaborators are brought together and who takes a leading role. Here it might be helpful and more realistic not to think of one UK Policy Laboratory, but several networked UK policy laboratories with common characteristics but different, though related areas of concern. These could include, for example, research and knowledge exchange, policy co-ordination, policy reviews, policy/practice networks. Given that England is so large and the regions within it are so diverse, a regional approach might also be a way forward.

Third, ideology will always be a feature of political life and, as in the past, political life will either support or suppress the willingness to engage in policy learning across the four countries of the UK. However, if the common problems are important enough, sufficiently articulated and recognised by a range of social partners, it may be that the forces for policy learning, in this case in relation to FE and skills, can win out over ideological differences. We will have to wait and see if the position of the UK under Brexit might prove to be one of those opportunities.

It may be that the conditions discussed above will help to stimulate processes of policy learning across the four countries of the UK. However, a sustained period of expansive policy learning will require yet more convergence. In this it would appear that England will have to move most and the motivation to do so is most likely to arise from wider political change as well as from policy dialogue.

A final reflection takes the analysis beyond the boundaries of the UK and a question as to whether ‘home international comparison’ and an exploration of the processes of convergence and divergence might prove useful in other geopolitical contexts as part of wider comparative analysis? Recent research by [López-Guereñu](#) (2018), for example, concerning VET reform in the Basque Country, supports the argument for the potential not only of comparisons between systems at the level of the nation state, but also for comparative analysis and policy learning in ‘plurinational or multinational states’. By this [López-Guereñu](#) is referring to what is also commonly understood, in the European context, as the ‘regional level’ in which processes of convergence and divergence can be explored in these more complex state settings. Given continued contestations between conceptions of a nation and state (Keating 2001) and processes of devolution in differing national contexts, it would seem that ‘internal

comparisons' and what can be learned from them might prove as valuable as more established 'external' comparative analysis.

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