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Learning in and learning from FE and Skills policy in Wales: a relational approach

Abstract

In the context of devolution, this paper argues that there is a distinctively Welsh flavour to FE and Skills policy, but that its nature and formation needs to be understood both intrinsically and relationally, especially in terms of its relationship to parallel policy developments in England. Consideration is given to structural aspects and significant changes in the 'economic narrative', and also to the reflection of certain values in policy and policy mechanisms. It is argued that policy learning of a sort visible in the realm of economic innovation is not yet apparent in the FE and Skills arena in Wales, where an avoidance of key features of English policy remains a touchstone. Finally, the paper sets out how a 'relational' approach is particularly helpful in appreciating these issues and in understanding the challenges in a major FE and Skills reform process in Wales.

Keywords

Further Education, Skills, Policy learning, Wales

Introduction

Ron Davies, a former Secretary of State for Wales, famously declared that Welsh devolution was 'a process not an event'. His comments followed the referendum in 1997 which produced a narrow majority of 50.3 per cent in favour of devolution (National Assembly for Wales 2018). 'Process' was a well-chosen term, given a long history of political pressure and significant post-war shifts in administration and governance such as the UK Labour Government's establishment in 1964 of the Office that Davies himself occupied between May 1997 and October 1998 (and which had replaced the earlier UK Government office of 'Minister for Welsh Affairs'). 'Process' is also a good term for the continuous developments and refinements to the nature of devolution up to the present day. Whilst the Welsh Government has had significant responsibility for most aspects of education and training policy since 1999, these powers have recently become more comprehensive and more secure. Of particular significance is the Wales Act 2017, which represents a new devolution settlement for Wales. Akin to Scotland, devolution is now defined not by a list of devolved areas but by a list of the Reserved Powers of the UK Parliament. The Welsh Government has primary lawmaking powers in those areas of governance that are not reserved, including education and training. It has some taxation and borrowing powers which come into full force during 2019.

In light of this context, and inspired by discussions across the four countries in the seminars that lie behind this special issue of the *Journal of Education and Work*, this paper is driven by four over-arching general questions:

1. What is the nature and texture of policy in the area of FE and Skills in Wales?
2. What is the relationship to other FE and Skills policy, especially in England?
3. How distinctive is FE and Skills policy in Wales?
4. Which concepts seem especially helpful in addressing such questions?

The paper is therefore both an attempt to understand particular aspects of policy and their emergence, and an argument about the most appropriate concepts to use in that endeavour. In the following sections, I signal conceptual tools that appear helpful, then offer a brief summary of some key contours of FE and Skills in Wales and a discussion of contextual factors such as the historic links between education and the economy, or political and economic patterns which despite their importance, remain poorly understood. I then look at the evidence for a distinctive ‘Welsh way of doing things’, introducing examples from high-level policy, the party-political texture, and then some features and ways of working. Turning then to more specific examples, two cases are described where there is strong evidence that the formation of Welsh FE and Skills policy has consciously distanced itself from related policy developments in England. The second of these is given more attention because it is a highly ambitious process which may ultimately lead to a distinctive national post-compulsory system. Finally, the paper argues that the most useful approach to understanding FE and Skills policy and practice in Wales is sociologically-informed and pays close attention to the economic and political context: in a word, it is a *relational* approach.

Promising conceptual tools

It is worth giving two closely-related concepts a little attention from the outset, namely *a relational approach* and *field*, both of which I take from the work of Bourdieu. The first refers to much more than ‘making comparisons’. Drawing upon a distinction made by Cassirer, Bourdieu insisted that ‘the real is relational’ (Bourdieu 1998). ‘Relational’ is in opposition to ‘substantivist’ or ‘essentialist’ understandings of the world, and especially, of social practices. For example, to take a relational view of academic and vocational programmes and qualifications is to go beyond attempts to define each by pinpointing and listing their key characteristics. Instead it would look at how academic and vocational programmes *co-construct* each other, and how social practices enact, reify and (probably) reproduce the distinction. It would also seek to bridge the common divide between ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, where one or the other of these two elements is usually given pre-eminence (James & Biesta 2007).

Secondly, the concept of ‘field’ is a promising ally in our task. Bourdieu’s development of it shares a great deal with its use in physics, mathematics and psychology, and in the case of the latter there was a direct building upon Kurt Lewin’s work. For Cassirer, field-thinking is the distinguishing epistemology of modern science, which has moved from a ‘substantialist’ mode of thought to a ‘relational’ one:

‘The field itself can no longer be understood as a merely additive whole, as an aggregate of parts. The field is not a thing-concept but a relation-concept; it is not composed of pieces but is a system, a totality of lines of force’ (Cassirer 2000: 92).

Field is now a quite widely used concept in the sociology of education, culture, policy and the State. At the same time, in public policy analysis most research continues to maintain a distance from such sociological concepts and approaches (Dubois 2015). This, Dubois explains, is because public policy analysis still draws heavily upon the policy science that developed in North America in the 1950s, which ‘...conceived policy as a chain of sequences

rather than in terms of a sociological analysis of the groups involved in making it' (Dubois 2015, p. 199).

Further education and skills in Wales

Few would disagree with the view of ColegauCymru/CollegesWales when they say, 'the FE sector is a key player in helping to deliver the Welsh Government's aims to widen participation, tackle social exclusion and stimulate economic regeneration' (ColegauCymru, 2018). There are currently 13 colleges in Wales, with around two-thirds of all 16-18 year-olds studying in them. Table 1 offers an overview of learners for the year 2017-18.

	Male	Female	All	Per-cent
Full-time	22,780	23,050	45,830	39%
Part-time	22,900	29,770	52,670	44%
Work-based learning	11,000	9,065	20,065	17%
Total	56,680	61,885	118,565	100%
Per-cent	48%	52%	100%	

Table 1: FE learners in Wales, 2017-18, by mode of study and sex. Adapted from StatsWales (2019).

ColegauCymru estimate that the FE sector currently provides around 85 per cent of funded vocational and technical education in Wales (ColegauCymru 2017, p. 1). Welsh Government data on learning activity in colleges show a great diversity of subject areas, with the most prevalent being: Engineering; Business, Management and Office Studies; Construction and Property (Built Env.); Care, Personal Development (including basic skills); Sales, Marketing and Retail; Catering, Leisure Services and Tourism. The same figures also suggest that under 8 per cent of learning activity across these providers is clearly non-vocational (including A and AS level, GCSEs, Access Certificate and Diploma, HE in FE) (James & Unwin 2016), though it is important to note that in Wales, some of the most substantial and successful A/AS level provision is in FE colleges.

Whilst in recent years the number of learners has stabilised, this comes on the end of a long period of reduction since the year 2005-2006. Most of the decline has been in part-time learners based in FE colleges. In terms of age, the vast majority of full-time learners are 19 and under, whereas part-time learners and work-based learners are much more evenly spread across the age-distribution (albeit with particularly large concentrations in the 21-24 and 25-39 age bands) (see StatsWales 2019).

Apprenticeships are a key focus in current policy. The year 2014-15 saw almost 20,000 new Apprenticeships start up, with another 48,000 already under way (Welsh Government 2017b, p. 12). This total is divided between: Foundation Apprenticeships (Level 2) at 45 per cent; Apprenticeships (Level 3) at 39 per cent; Higher Apprenticeships (Level 4+) at 16 per cent. Apprenticeships in Wales are organized under 120 'frameworks', some at multiple levels. Each framework contains competency and technical knowledge qualifications, and at least two Essential Skills qualifications (or equivalent). Wales has a commitment to

maintaining qualifications as part of Apprenticeships, and to the National Occupational Standards in order to maintain parity between systems across the UK. There are ambitious plans to boost the number of apprenticeships. The Welsh Government predicts a doubling of the demand for qualified workers at Levels 4-6 by 2024 and, recognizing the historic emphasis on Level 2, wishes to initiate a step-change in the nature of provision and participation. Apprenticeships are seen as 'an essential ingredient of economic success and a vital tool in building a stronger, fairer and more equal Wales' (Welsh Government 2017b, p.3), and to this end, the Welsh Government has instituted a five-year plan for phased introduction, wishing to see a minimum of 100,000 Apprenticeships by the end of the current Assembly term (i.e. May 2021). To be successful, this will require '(s)tronger cooperation between academic and vocational education, and the way in which these systems work together' (Welsh Government 2017a, p.2). The Welsh Government proposes to integrate Apprenticeships into the wider education system, including the further integration of degree level Apprenticeships.

Persistent structural relationships and new economic narratives

The history of the economy of Wales and its relationship to educational policy and provision has been helpfully examined by Rees (2015). Rees notes that the Welsh response to the widely-shared 'knowledge economy' discourse is distinctive by virtue of the historic shape of the Welsh economy. At its peak a major European centre of industrialisation, the Welsh economy was remarkable for the narrowness of its sectoral base and the high proportion of external ownership, even by the inter-war period (Morgan & Sayer 1988). There were few demands for technical education, with large numbers of (mainly male) school-leavers directly employed in coal and metal-based manufacturing and related 'heavy' industries. The economy was also highly integrated, with an agricultural sector supplying the more industrialised areas. In this context:

'Educational progression beyond the elementary level was viewed as a means of *avoiding* the staple industries, rather than a route into them. Hence, for a minority of young people post-elementary education was a means of entering the professions or commerce, *rather than* the staple industries of the regional economy; and this, in turn, implied a marked preference – not least from parents – for a 'traditional academic' curriculum'. (Rees 2015, p. 217. Original emphasis.)

Postwar expansions in secondary schooling consolidated two related features of the education system in Wales, namely the celebration of academic achievement in the grammar school tradition, and a corresponding lack of attention to technical education and vocational provision. This meant that a high proportion of young people continued to leave school with little or nothing by way of qualifications. It could be argued that when the 1980s brought the final collapse of the industrial base, this presented Wales with a greater shock than had been experienced in most other parts of the UK, because it was less 'diluted'. It certainly exposed the underdevelopment of the more work-facing parts of educational provision. For Rees, there is in Wales a strong element of 'path dependency', where 'current problems reflect historical trajectories of development' (p. 227).

Such historic relationships and accommodations between economic activity and educational policy and provision are, then, an important 'structural' feature, against which more contemporary shifts and movements play out. There is however a further layer of context

here, in that the economic and social characteristics of Wales can only be understood relationally. In an ambitious paper that begins to revisit and revise the 'world systems' approach, Jones (2015) illustrates how both the concepts and the data inherent in the most influential economic thinking actually tells us very little about uneven economic development such as that found in the UK. One example would be the 'unspoken but important axiom...that the level of economic activity and growth of a region depends on the level, quality and usage of geographically located factors of production' (:6)ⁱ. This treatment of an area as if it was a mini-country and an isolated economic entity with certain 'natural' features, in turn, leads to recipes for regional development that focus on increasing the quality or amount of local resources (e.g. though inward investment), or finding ways to increase productivity (such as investing in infrastructure). Jones highlights several problems with this, declaring that 'Our regional development analytical 'toolkit' is thus not fit for purpose, conceptually or empirically' (:7). In using it, '...we have promulgated a myth that regions exist on a competitive and largely even playing field, where a few more skills, some better R&D or improved market access might catapult a region up the national hierarchy' (:7).

Jones' point is illustrated well by looking at ONS data on GDP and GVA per capita, by region, over time. There is a stark consistency of the rank ordering of the 12 regions of the UK since 1985. Whilst there are some minor shifts, he summarises the picture thus:

'If the UK regions were competing in the English Premiership, the same club would have won in every season since 1985, and the same three relegated in *every single season*' (: 8. Original emphasis).

It would seem that the 'competitive myth' partially obscures ongoing political and economic patterns which appear to be very well established, and these patterns matter a great deal. Recent refusals to fund major infrastructure projects designed to foster new investment and growth in Wales include a tidal lagoon project in Swansea Bay, and the electrification of the main Cardiff to Swansea railway line. The sums of money involved are substantial but modest in comparison to investment in (for example) Crossrail, or HS1/HS2 (high speed rail links between London and the north of England), or that being discussed in connection with a possible third runway at Heathrow. In the electrification case, the decision contradicted earlier Prime Ministerial promises, and for this and the tidal lagoon project, the cost/benefit assumptions and calculations could be (and were) challenged. It is possible to understand such events as symptomatic of an ongoing centre-periphery relationship or even as instances of active under-development in the sense explicated by Andre Gunder Frank (e.g. Frank, 1996; Kay, 2005). For Peter Hain (now Lord Hain, former MP for Neath, and former Secretary of State for Wales), there is a well-established pattern in which Whitehall and Westminster are more likely to respond positively to demands from Northern Ireland or Scotland than from Wales (BBC 2018). Ongoing habitual and politically-embedded economic limitations of this kind are likely to have a cumulative and self-fulfilling effect. Even austerity measures which look like 'equal misery for all' can in fact reproduce or magnify economic difference, where for example cuts in tax credits will generate more hardship in those areas of the UK with higher proportions of families and children in poverty, such as Wales (Davies 2015).

Appreciation of structural relationships of these kinds must, however, be balanced with attention to home-grown economic policy and strategy. In Wales, following industrial decline, this took the form of 'classic' traditional regional policy, which was

'...built around two pillars: an inward investment strategy to attract foreign-owned branch plants and a state-driven strategy to build technology centres. The first pillar collapsed when the foreign plants found cheaper locations in Eastern Europe and Asia, while the second pillar proved to be a costly failure because the technology centres were effectively supply-side initiatives divorced from the demand-side needs of the business community' (Morgan forthcoming 2019 p. *)

Such a diagnosis is becoming widely recognised in Wales and has contributed to a new economic narrative, based on more recent concepts of place-based innovation and incorporating a more expansive conceptualisation of both problems and solutions. There are exciting examples of high-tech, high-value business in Wales, working closely with research expertise in universities and for whom sustainability is often an important goal. These include the world-leading compound semiconductor company *IQE* and its series of innovative projects that include working with the Welsh Government, and *Riversimple*, a company that not only designs and builds hydrogen-powered cars but has ambitions to radically alter the concept of car ownership and achieve massive reductions in the environmental impact of transport. Yet this familiar 'science and technology' concept of innovation, focused on economic competitiveness, contrasts with a 'socio-ecological model' which emphasises '*...intrinsically significant* ends of human needs and ecological integrity' (Morgan forthcoming 2019, p. *) and underlines the importance of the public sector, as being

"central in the delivery of many services of social and economic value. In this regard, it has a pivotal role in answering...today's major societal challenges such as demographic ageing, increased demand for healthcare services, risk of poverty and social exclusion, the need for better and more transparent governance, and a more sustainable resource management" (Foray et al 2012: 113).

Wales is the first country in the UK where the Government has sought to make a socio-ecological model central to its policy, in a particular variety called the 'Foundational Economy'. This is centred '*...not on the fashionable sectors of the knowledge economy, but the unfashionable sectors that are said to keep us "safe, sound and civilised" – namely health, education, dignified eldercare, agrifood, energy and the like*' (Morgan, forthcoming-2019, p. *). It includes those goods and services that are the building-blocks of everyday life, both 'material services' and 'providential services', the latter including education, in which the state is often the provider or commissioner. The Foundational Economy model challenges what has become mainstream thinking: for example, rather than focusing on economic growth and individual consumption, Governments should in this view concern themselves with 'social consumption of essential goods and services' as this is much more likely to support the wellbeing of citizens (see for example Foundational Economy Collective 2018).

The emergence of such a 'narrative' suggests *policy learning*. But does it also suggest social, cultural and political tendencies that distinguish Wales and set it apart in the UK, especially from England? It is difficult to discuss such matters without falling into the traps of

reification, essentialism or even perhaps romanticism. The next section sets out two 'starting points' for answering the question, in the form of a snapshot of crucial legislation that now frames *all* devolved policy, and then a more specific example of the impact of party politics on policy development. The section then lists some formalised policy processes which illustrate the significance - at least in rhetorical terms – of partnership working.

A 'Welsh way of doing things'?

Legislating for a better future

In 2015 the Welsh Government passed the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act*, giving it '...the ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve our social, cultural, environmental and economic well-being'. The Act requires public bodies to consider 'the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other, and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change'. It has seven well-being goals, focused on: prosperity; resilience; health; equality; community cohesion; culture and Welsh language; global responsiveness. Each of these is expressed in a definition. The first, 'A prosperous Wales', is as follows:

'An innovative, productive and low carbon society which recognises the limits of the global environment and therefore uses resources efficiently and proportionately (including acting on climate change), and which develops a skilled and well-educated population in an economy which generates wealth and provides employment opportunities, allowing people to take advantage of the wealth generated through securing decent work' (Welsh Government 2015a).

The Act also posits particular 'ways of working', including the involvement of others with an interest, and collaboration. All public bodies, including the Welsh government itself, must incorporate consideration of the well-being goals in their work. The Act attempts to enshrine cultural values in legislation, giving a baseline of such values, which although they will always allow variety in interpretation, do have a constancy and a coherence. Whilst the detail is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that there is interesting internationally comparative research strongly suggesting that the values espoused by a nation may affect the extent to which it enacts policies and pursues practices that promote or diminish the well-being of present and future generations of children (Kasser 2011, p. 211).

Whilst it is still relatively 'early days', the Act is taken seriously in a range of policy processes, including public consultation documents. Policy is often framed and justified in terms of the impact on people and the quality of lives, and in addition to the *Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act* there are further over-arching value statements to be seen in the Welsh Government's National Strategy, *Prosperity for All*, (in which 'skills' is one of only five 'key areas') (Welsh Government 2017b).

A Welsh way of doing politics?

A second starting-point for the question about distinctive Welsh tendencies concerns political parties and politics. As many have noted, whilst New Labour oversaw the removal

of public services from democratic control and encouraged private capital to provide services for profit, Welsh Labour retained a strong social democratic direction. This not only included such things as policies on prescription charges or student loans, but also interventions to stimulate the economy when private capital did not (Moon, 2013). Importantly, Welsh Labour also operates in a particular context, where another party - Plaid Cymru – adopted ‘community socialism’ as its constitutional aim as long ago as 1981 (Elliott 2013). Elliott points to Plaid’s longstanding interest in cooperatives, credit unions and locally-attuned economic policy, and mentions former party member Raymond Williamsⁱⁱ who championed local economic control and expressed disdain for a mainstream Labour metropolitan centralism. Elliott draws a further parallel with Gramsci’s appreciation of the inadequacy of ‘cosmopolitan’ solutions, which he thought ignored important local and regional differences in economic goals and activity (Elliott 2013, and see Williams 1983).

Writing specifically about education, Rees (2011) describes the significance of National Assembly Labour-led coalitions with Plaid Cymru, and before that, with the Liberal Democrats, providing ideological as well as efficiency drivers for policy. Deeply-rooted social democratic virtues are given expression through emphasis on the rights and obligations of citizenship and on what it is that children and young people should be entitled to. The state is seen as having an important central role in universal educational provision. Furthermore:

‘Citizen ‘voice’ (of students, parents, professionals and community groups) is preferred to marketized forms of consumer ‘choice’ as a means of developing educational provision. Partnership and collaboration between the central state, local education authorities and professional groups are seen as the most effective means of developing and implementing educational policy...’ (Rees 2011: 61-62, original emphasis).

The latter point is especially visible in a series of changes since 2008 which are collectively referred to as ‘the transformation agenda’. One of the early Assembly Measures was the 2009 Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure, which established a minimum curriculum for 14-19 year olds. Crucially, this minimum contained both vocational and academic options, and required fresh forms of collaboration between schools, colleges and training providers in Local Partnerships, underpinned by strategy documents (for example, DCELLS 2008). At the same time it encouraged ‘bottom-up’ proposals for rationalisations and mergers. As a whole the ‘transformation agenda’ did not produce the degree of cross-sectoral collaboration envisaged in government, and it left untouched many examples of duplication and inefficiency in provision (for example, between schools and FE in certain areas of general vocational provision). Nevertheless, it was still radical in its effects, with some 13 FE and FE/HE mergers since 2006 (Hazelkorn 2016, section 3). Also notable is that the process was relatively harmonious, with ‘partnership’ generally held to be a desirable goal.

Partnership in policy and practice

The term ‘partnership’ is however difficult to define and can mean many different things. Whilst ‘social partnership’ is most often used to refer to agreements between (and processes involving) employers, trade unions and governments for handling industrial relations over time, a slightly broader ‘cultural’ concept seems useful in respect of the field of further education and skills in Wales. It is worth asking ‘to what extent is there

meaningful dialogue between key stakeholders, such as policymakers and providers'? In a 2011 comparison across the four UK nations, it was found that for both Scottish and Welsh FE college principals:

'...dialogue with (and occasional influence upon) policy-makers is a normal expectation of all parties. By contrast, some leaders in English colleges perceive that they have little or no chance to influence the development and implementation of policy' (James 2011, p. 121).

The same study concluded that Welsh college leaders had historically enjoyed a more active engagement with policymakers than their English counterparts, confirming earlier comparative work which had also underlined the prevalence of *partnership* in Welsh policy processes (Raffe & Spours 2007). A variety of probable reasons were identified, including the size and scale of the country, its political texture and social and economic history, and the effectiveness of ColegauCymru as a vehicle for provider interests, deliberation and collective voice.

Further comparison with England highlights three further senses of partnership that have a direct bearing on FE and skills in Wales. Firstly, a strong rhetoric of partnership is woven in to the structures and fabric of the main advisory and decision-making bodies in Wales. The Welsh Government's *Council for Economic Development*, chaired by the First Minister, is a primary source of advice for government on economic and business policies, and reflects duties enshrined in legislation. Its membership includes business, social enterprise and trade unions. The *Wales Employment and Skills Board* also has this breadth of representationⁱⁱⁱ. In addition, Wales has three *Regional Skills Partnerships* (focused on: South East; North; South-West & Mid-Wales) whose Boards include representatives from employers in the public, private and third sectors; local government; further and higher education; work-based learning providers; employment services. The Regional Skills Partnerships analyse economic challenges and likely growth areas, identifying skill needs. They are charged with annual reporting to government, including recommendations that can shape how the government uses its skills funding. Views differ greatly on how effectively these mechanisms work, and it is of course a separate empirical question as to whether the concepts of partnership translate into truly dialogic or collaborative activity.

Secondly, ColegauCymru differs from its nearest equivalent organisations in England. Originally set up in 1993, it has a recently-revised structure including a small Board of Trustees and a CEO/Principals' Forum. It has a core staff team led by a Chief Executive Officer. The organisation is highly networked, with staff and Board members representing Welsh FE on a range of committees and working parties that shape post-compulsory and lifelong learning in Wales. This comprehensive coverage gives ColegauCymru a relatively powerful voice and enables ongoing dialogue with relevant interests in government. The organisation's annual conference in 2018 included an address from the Minister, and this and many other keynote sessions at the conference made direct reference to working together in partnership for the realisation of government priorities. The organisation also provides a wide range of services to the sector, including research, raising awareness of FE, professional development, sharing of good practice, and developing leaders. Whilst there are similarities to the much larger Association of Colleges in England, ColegauCymru appears

to be more directly and regularly involved with policymakers, and more ‘immersive’ for its constituent members: it is currently inconceivable for an FE provider to work effectively in Wales without being part of this organisation.

Thirdly, and more generally, educational policy-making in Wales relies heavily on the commissioning of independent reviews carried out by experts with a background in high-quality academic research^{iv}. As well as reflecting an oft-stated desire for partnership between researchers and policymakers, these reviews often declare a basis *in* values of partnership and encompass commitments to communities. They are sometimes followed by consultations which, whilst they are not universally highly regarded, are generally viewed with less cynicism than similar processes in England. There are also attempts by government departments to engage relevant interests in the co-construction/co-production of new arrangements (e.g. the new National Professional Learning model for teachers being developed during 2018, wherein a range of ‘middle tier’ organisations [such as universities providing teacher education] could bid for small commissions for work that would then contribute to the shape of the national system).

Policy learning and policy avoidance

As already mentioned, there is evidence that in regard to state-level economic innovation, the Welsh Government has learnt from some past disappointments. Morgan (2017) outlines a shift from a centralised and directed innovation project (called ‘Technium’), to a more networked model which has been much more successful whilst using far less public money. In this latter project (a low-carbon energy project called ‘Specific’) the state is positioned as a ‘curator’ rather than a ‘controller’ in a trio of government, universities and industry, and there have been clear advances with high impact. The first project was largely founded in response to convenient funding opportunities and then expanded ten-fold before any evaluation of its first iteration, so feedback and learning were absent. In contrast, the second project promotes experimentation and collaborative creativity: it requires learning and allows ‘failure’. Morgan draws on both Hayek and Rodrik to explore this shift, which, it is argued, could become a more permanent feature of the Welsh policy landscape. But what of *educational* policymaking and practices in Wales? These continue to show a clear divergence from England, but this is not as yet attributable to the kind of shift just outlined. In this final section I outline two examples of policy learning which, I would argue, include strong themes of the *avoidance* of policy that has grown in (and/or bears the hallmarks of) the English context. One pertains to FE college governance, whilst the other refers to contemporary and system-level proposals.

FE Governance

In 2011 the Welsh Government published a major review of Further Education governance arrangements following a process chaired by Rob Humphreys (Humphreys 2011). Conducted between July 2010 to February 2011, the review roughly coincided with the Westminster Government’s White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* and the subsequent Education Act 2011. This latter legislation gave FE colleges in England greater independence and autonomy intended to enable them to compete in an expanding market which would include other kinds of provider. The comparative significance of this change was underlined when the Office for National Statistics judged that, as distinct from those in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, in FE Corporations in England, these changes were ‘sufficient to

remove public sector control, and therefore these institutions are reclassified as NPISH (Non-profit institutions serving households) bodies from this point' (ONS 2012).

The Humphreys review incorporated a consideration of the nature and purpose of the Further Education sector, and states within the first few pages:

'As a group, we took the firm and shared view that while FEIs (Further Education Institutions) are autonomous organisations, the public investment that they receive means that *further education as a set of institutions, activities and outcomes is a public good*. This analysis of the sector helped to frame and shape our deliberations and recommendations' (Humphreys 2011: 7. Emphasis added).

This is an explicit rejection of the marketisation narrative. The review also drew conceptual inspiration from the work of Jocelyne Bourgon, a Canadian theorist of governance and public administration known internationally for her development of 'New Public Administration' and for her re-invigoration of concepts of public service in the face of capitalist economic crisis (for example see Bourgon 2017). Importantly, this direction of travel, so clearly distinct from England's at that time, did not merely reflect the values and approach of the particular review group and its Chair. The terms of reference, set by the (then) Welsh Assembly Government, *required* that the review consider its *Social Enterprise Action Plan*, which had been launched in 2009. This recognised that, '...in the current economic climate, social enterprise is more not less relevant. The Welsh Assembly Government's goal is to expand and grow social enterprise across Wales' (Humphreys 2011, p. 40).

The recommendations of the review included some fairly radical changes, though ones that did not require new legislation. It was proposed that governing bodies be replaced by Boards that were smaller and 'leaner', but at the same time would be linked to a new structure, adapted from the world of social enterprise, in the form of a wider Membership Body. It was felt that this new structure could enhance the educational effectiveness and accountability of college governance arrangements, bringing them closer to the relevant communities, businesses and other interests. It would also enable the development of new forms of partnership with other organisations. The review recognised, however, that in order to succeed, such a new structure would need changes in organisation culture as well as structures.

A post-compulsory system?

Much larger in scope is a process currently underway which may ultimately lead to a highly distinctive post-compulsory education landscape in Wales. In 2015 the Welsh Government commissioned Professor Ellen Hazelkorn 'to review, analyse and document the current arrangements for the oversight of post-compulsory education in Wales' and to advise on their effectiveness, making recommendations for the future including any 'need for legislation and new or reformed institutional arrangements' (Hazelkorn 2016, p. 58). The report, *Towards 2030: A framework for building a world-class post-compulsory education system for Wales*, was published in 2016. It was followed by a consultation process.

As with the governance example discussed above, there appears to be an important relationship to certain policy developments that were underway in England around the same time. The UK government's Bill leading to the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 had:

'...the explicit purpose to open up the sector to increased competition and choice, so that new providers can start up, be granted degree-awarding powers, and achieve university status. A new body, the Office for Students, will act as a single market regulator, assisted by a new mechanism for judging the quality of teaching, the Teaching Excellence Framework, which will take into account destinations including employment. The Bill continues a now very well established direction of travel in UK (especially English) higher education policy, most clearly articulated in the 2011 White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System*' (James 2018, pp 239-40).

Whilst neither the Bill nor its own preceding White Paper set out any explicit vision or rationale for higher education and its purposes, there is nevertheless a strong view of these things, presented in the form of the insistence on markets, consumerism and specific measures of employment success. As has been remarked by many, such policy choices hide their ideology, and tend to present themselves in a particular way – not as policy choices *per se*, but as 'the way things are'.

The Hazelkorn Review can best be understood against this aspect of the context. A first section (entitled 'What is Wales trying to achieve') highlights the importance of values and includes a list of characteristics of a post-compulsory *system*, and is worth quoting at length:

'Education plays a vital role in the national eco-system underpinning and ensuring personal success, health and satisfaction, and contributing to economic and social outcomes for countries as well as global benefits. *Because there are direct correlations between societal value systems and policy choices*, how Wales balances its objectives for a skilled labour force, greater social equity, balanced regional growth, active engaged citizens, strong competitive institutions, attracting and retaining talent, and global competitiveness, matters. This means ensuring the post-compulsory system is characterized by: open and competitive education, offering the widest chance and choice to the broadest number of students; a coherent portfolio of differentiated high performing and actively engaged institutions, providing a breadth of educational, research and student experiences from 16 years throughout active life; developing the knowledge and skills that Welsh citizens need to contribute to society throughout their lives, while attracting international talent; graduates able to succeed in the labour market, fuel and sustain personal, social and economic development, and underpin civil society; and operating successfully in the global market, international in perspective and responsive to change' (ibid, section 1. Emphasis added).

It would be difficult to produce a statement that more clearly distances itself from the idea that there are economic imperatives that over-ride (mere?) values and which must be followed at all costs (Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's doctrine of 'There Is No Alternative' or 'TINA'). The statement not only tells us that societal values are important,

but then goes on to list some of them. Its vision and breadth of ambition has similarities to Lifelong Learning policies elsewhere in Europe and, of course, earlier in England.

Such 'vision' elements of the Review are balanced by a detailed practical attention to current institutions, agencies and functions. For example, the report notes that currently, oversight of post-compulsory education in Wales is undertaken by a mix of Government and Government-sponsored bodies'. A series of issues or problems to be overcome is set out, including a lack of strategic thinking at government and institutional level, insufficient collaboration, too much competition, confusion at overlapping roles between and across institutions and agencies, and an absence of coherent pathways, especially throughout working lives.

The major recommendations of the report stress the need to work at *system* level, again underlining the stark contrast to the dominant policy thrust in England. Three major 'reform directions' are signalled:

- 'Adoption of a post-compulsory system perspective which can ensure a strategic, coordinated and coherent approach to educational provision for all learners and society.
- Establishment of a new post-compulsory intermediary body with the legislative authority to undertake and implement system planning coordination functions.
- Better alignment between national policy priorities, institutional funding and mission, and performance and productivity whilst respecting institutional autonomy' (ibid section 2.3).

The subsequent Welsh Government White Paper *Public Good and a Prosperous Wales* (Welsh Government 2017c) confirmed acceptance of the recommendations and re-stated the Government's commitment to reform to achieve a 'truly effective post-compulsory education system'. There is emphasis on meeting the needs of all learners, from school leavers through to older adults; on both re-training prompted by changes in the labour market *and* further learning to respond to individual interest. Most importantly, the White Paper sets out a diagnosis of a current post-compulsory system which is 'not fully optimised to respond to future trends and the demands of more diverse learners' and which 'needs to become more capable of responding quickly to changing circumstances, as well as becoming more flexible and adaptable to the needs of learners and employers' (Welsh Government 2017c, p.9).

A further consultation closed in the summer of 2018 and at the time of writing, responses are under consideration. A consultation document (*Public Good and a Prosperous Wales: Next Steps*) begins to describe the nature of the new Tertiary Education and Research Commission for Wales. It will be sponsored by the Welsh Government and will work within specific a strategic and funding framework, but will also be 'arms-length'. The body will be '...the sole funder and regulator for further and higher education, apprenticeships, work-based learning, adult learning and sixth forms. It will also be responsible for Welsh Government funded research and innovation' (Welsh Government 2018, p.6).

The further promise of a relational view

So far, we have seen the importance of examining and thinking about aspects of Welsh FE and Skills policy in context, and there is the suggestion of what we might term 'policy avoidance'. There is however a further sense in which a relational view might help us to articulate and acknowledge the complexities of radical policy formation. The vision for a new post-compulsory system is itself coherent, and is 'utopian' in the most positive sense (Levitas, 2013). Yet whilst there continues to be considerable momentum, it is too soon to say whether these developments will eventually produce the kind of comprehensive tertiary system at the heart of the vision that drives it. There are major technical and political difficulties (e.g. working out new systems that will serve radically reconfigured arrangements for governance, finance and quality; securing time in the legislative schedule, and so forth), but even a full appreciation of these may underestimate the task at hand.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to carry out a thoroughgoing Bourdieusian field analysis (for illustrations of how this can be done, see for example Hilgers & Mangez, 2015; Grenfell & James, 1998). Present purposes are served by keeping in mind the perspective which the concept of field represents, and perhaps one specific feature of social field analysis, which is to try to gauge the autonomy of the field: For example, to what extent are actors (people, Institutions etc.) subject to constraints from elsewhere, i.e. other fields? The Welsh post-compulsory landscape is not currently conceivable as one field because it does not currently have high autonomy. This is partly about the softness (and for many practical purposes, invisibility) of borders between the four countries of the UK, and there are some parallels with Jones's regional development myths discussed earlier. However, it is mainly to do with the multiple purposes, functions and connections of the key constituents. For example, in addition to their close funding, statutory and other relationships to the Welsh Government, universities in Wales have (and continually build) other relationships – with a wide range of academic, public, private and third sector organisations and individuals, locally, nationally, globally. These relationships are *fundamental* to their operations and identities, and come with a variety of obligations and accountabilities. The same is increasingly true of colleges of further education. A different example is that school sixth forms are *technically* post-compulsory in Wales, but there is little point in pretending that they can therefore be regarded simply as separate from the secondary provision with which they often share a site, teachers, buildings, an identity, a name and a history. School sixth forms are clearly also part of a field of secondary education (indeed, a widespread common-sense perception has it that the existence of a sixth form is a positive signal in terms of the quality of a secondary school). Other players also have stakes that cross physical and policy boundaries. Employers providing apprenticeships find themselves working across diverging English and Welsh systems. The concept of 'field' can therefore assist in asking helpful questions, such as 'given the autonomy and missions of universities and their practices which are attuned to many other economic, social, cultural purposes, stakeholders and goals, in what ways and in what senses can they become full and committed players in a new nation-focused post-compulsory education system'?

Mention was made earlier of Dubios' point about the significance of a concept of field for understanding policy. A simple 'linear' reading of devolution might note that education and skills is an area in which the Welsh Government has primary lawmaking powers, then go on to attribute any failure to achieve wholesale reform to a lack of will, sound judgement or strategic focus. A relational view, on the other hand, acknowledges that we cannot always presume a direct correspondence between policy responsibility and the capacity to act, or with real opportunities to command or orchestrate change.

More generally, a relational approach contains a helpful reminder to be wary of 'recipies' of the sort that others have called 'policy borrowing'. Bourdieu was especially disdainful of work where social practices are turned into simple variables, presented in mechanical and direct relationships with, say, social class groups, and then assumed to be highly portable and generalisable, having the same meanings and significance across quite different contexts. He termed this 'naïve realism'. If we wish to heed such advice for present purposes, we might look for distinctive characteristics of FE and Skills policy in Wales, try to appreciate their advantages and disadvantages and even suggest whether they offer interesting ways ahead in other jurisdictions. Crucially, however, we should avoid the rather classic mistake whereby policy responses that have worked in one setting are assumed to provide a recipe or remedy for a similar problem elsewhere. What may be much more helpful is to 'go beyond' in a different sense, namely in trying to understand what gave rise to specific policy developments and how they came about, and whether the processes involved can be taken as signs of ongoing patterns, structures and/or relationships, within Wales and then between Wales and other countries.

Conclusion

Many of the issues that the Hazelkorn process seeks to address were clearly visible nearly a decade earlier. For example, the *Independent Review of the Mission and Purpose of Further Education in Wales* (also known as the Webb Review - Webb 2007), concluded that only 'a reconfigured system' and 'enhanced governance, local and national, that drives priorities, overcomes barriers and spans boundaries' could deliver post-compulsory provision that would serve all learners well. The same Review also underlined a need which has continued to be identified in subsequent diagnoses, namely a need for greater collaboration: Webb pointed to the continuation of '...a high level of unhelpful competition for learners amongst schools and between schools and colleges' which did not offer 'the best possible choice of provision for all young people' (Webb 2007, p.3). One reading of the momentum behind the 'Hazelkorn process' is that recommendations such as those from Webb, together with extensive reorganisation of further education colleges under the 'transformation agenda', have so far failed to have the desired effect, and that only a new and centralised funding and regulatory body will overcome the inertia, or intransigence, currently in the system. However, as we have seen, there are longer-standing difficulties, and we need also to take into account the inherited context, the economic, social, cultural (and perhaps even emotional) 'structures' which are both physical and cognitive manifestations of the past. For some observers, the historic and continuing separation between education and skills policy and economic policy in the very departmental structures of the Welsh Government may also make genuine advances more difficult.

This paper has suggested that it is necessary to think about FE and skills policy and practice in Wales in a wide 'relational' perspective. Whilst there are signs that Welsh economic policy is now, in part, determined by an explicit recognition of past failures, I have argued that policy in education and skills is more determined by the avoidance of dominant directions of travel in England, and that through their existing and developing relationships beyond the national context, the key players may find difficulties in harnessing themselves to a single Wales-focused system. I am certainly not suggesting that reactions to England dominates FE and Skills policy in Wales: there are many other important influences, not least through regular contact with policy and research expertise in Scotland. Nor am I suggesting some sort of habitual obstinacy. The avoidance of major elements of English policy is a more nuanced process, and it bears witness to a distinctive position that is both structural and ideological, and in a more general sense, values-driven. The divergence so produced may tell us as much, about England as it does about Wales, but for Wales it is reminder that there is a powerful combination of elements, such as: a sophisticated model of economic innovation; a strong social democratic flavour to politics; a desire and perhaps propensity for partnership; a strong sense of national identity. Formidable though it is, it remains to be seen if this combination of features is sufficient to achieve the goal of a coherent and integrated post-compulsory system.

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ⁱ Clearly, Wales is a country rather than a 'region'. However, the term is commonly used in research of the kind cited which compares different parts of the UK.

ⁱⁱ In Williams' 'cultural materialism', the 'material' refers to historical and social pressure on cultural practices, whilst the 'cultural' is far from some kind of 'superstructural' product of economic relations. Culture does not just respond to power and economics, but it shapes the moral world in which power and economic activity are conceived and played out.

ⁱⁱⁱ The *Wales Employment and Skills Board* was chaired by the Wales Commissioner to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills until the latter body was disbanded in 2016. It is now chaired in rotation by the three chairs of the Regional Skills Partnerships, all of whom are major employers.

^{iv} In recent years, the main components of the education landscape in Wales have been the subject of major commissioned reviews. These include: the Diamond Review of higher education funding and student finance (Welsh Government, 2016); the Donaldson Review of the school curriculum and assessment (Welsh Government 2015b); and reviews of teacher education & professional development, including those by Tabberer (2013) and Furlong (2015).

^v Within the remit of the review is the WG view that we are now at '...an appropriate time to review and align the arrangements for the oversight of governance in and between institutions involved in the provision of post-compulsory education' (ibid, section 1).