

EDITORIAL

Policy for the education and training of 14- to 19-year-olds in the UK – new uncertainties and new divisions?

Background

When this special issue of the *London Review of Education* was first conceived, 14–19 education and training was a major policy priority for the New Labour Government in England, for the Welsh Assembly Government in Wales and for the two education-related ministries in Northern Ireland, although each of these countries, as Dennis Gunning and David Raffe point out in their article in this volume, have taken a different approach to the area. Scotland has never had an overt 14–19 policy, but its unified qualifications structure, introduced in the mid-1990s, has brought about significant change to this phase of education in recent years.

Since the election of the UK Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in May 2010, however, things have changed in England, with possible ramifications for the other nations of the UK. The context for this special issue is thus one of uncertainty and considerable policy flux that is likely to increase differences in 14–19 education and training between England, on the one hand, and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, on the other (Hodgson, Spours, and Waring 2011).

This special issue is an early attempt to reflect on the new economic and political landscape using historical and system-wide perspectives. In this introductory article we provide a brief overview of recent developments in each of the four countries and the new direction of policy in England in order to identify key areas of debate and potential divergence. This brief comparative analysis also serves as a backdrop for more detailed discussion in subsequent articles.

Recent 14–19 developments across the UK

New Labour's approach in England was framed by two major concerns – raising levels of participation and attainment for 14- to 19-year-olds and bringing about change without fundamentally disturbing the established structures of qualifications and providers. This led the previous government towards a number of policy preferences in the areas of qualifications, institutional organisation, performance targets and financial support for education participation beyond 16 (see Higham and Yeomans, this issue).

The official 14–19 reform agenda started in 2002, with the proposal for more flexible qualifications arrangements for 14- to 16-year-olds, in which a greater number of vocational awards would be on offer (DfEs 2002). Advanced level qualifications for 16- to 19-year-olds had already been made more flexible through the *Curriculum 2000* reform, which included the introduction of a two-stage, modular General Certificate of Education advanced level qualification (A level). Proposals for a more coherent unified 14–19 qualifications system were considered in 2003–2004 by the Tomlinson Review (Working Group on 14–19

Reform 2004) and supported by education ministers but not, as it would turn out, by Prime Minister Tony Blair (Hodgson and Spours 2008). In the event, the unified system proposals were rejected. Instead, the Government published a White Paper on 14–19 education and training (DfES 2005), that promoted an entirely new qualification, the Diploma, an applied grouped award that would sit alongside or partially absorb GCSEs, A levels and other existing qualifications. At the same time, the DfES actively supported collaboration between schools, colleges and work-based learning providers to ensure the offer of the 17 lines of Diplomas in each locality as part of a 14–19 entitlement. However, at the same time, it continued to encourage institutional competition. Performance tables were also changed to stimulate the offer and uptake of vocational qualifications. Diplomas, for example, were awarded generous credit when compared with single GCSEs and A levels. Alongside these qualification and institutional reforms, there was an increased focus on learner participation. Here the policy instruments employed were the statutory raising of the participation age to 17 by 2013 and to 18 by 2015 (DCSF 2007), reinforced by the introduction of Education Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) for 16- to 19-year-olds.

Viewed overall, 14–19 education policy in England under New Labour could be seen as an attempt to blur boundaries between general and vocational learning and the roles of schools, colleges and work-based learning providers, rather than fundamentally reforming underlying structures that had traditionally supported educational and social division (see Hodgson and Spours, this issue). As a result more young people took a mix of general and vocational qualifications and institutions formed partnerships to provide a range of learning contexts for 14- to 19-year-olds. The ‘hybrid’ approach was heavily driven from the centre by a range of policy levers – funding, inspection, targets and performance tables.

Wales, on the other hand, has been gradually developing its own educational identity following Parliamentary Devolution in 1999. However, it has faced the problem of being a small country which, while wanting to take a distinctive approach to education and training to Westminster, has a form of devolution which remains dependent on obtaining enabling powers from Westminster for its legislation and has remained linked to English qualifications. While the central strategic intentions of 14–19 policy aims in Wales are similar to those of the other UK countries – in particular to raise participation rates and levels of achievement – there have been important differences. Unlike England, Wales chose not to raise the statutory participation age; instead, the Welsh Assembly legislated to place a duty on local authorities and providers to offer a wide range of curriculum options to meet the needs of all learners and their chosen pathways and to provide support for learners through access to Learning Coaching. The 14–19 Learning Pathways (WAG, 2002) policy is strongly connected to the development and implementation of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification. This qualification can be taken in English, Welsh or a mix of the two. It is intended to be a unifying, overarching qualification at different levels that recognises learning and achievement in academic and/or vocational qualifications, but which also requires learners to achieve a core programme that develops a broader set of skills to prepare them for lifelong learning, for work and for citizenship (Pring et al. 2009). The 14–19 policy in Wales has been reinforced through other Welsh Assembly Government approaches. These include the existence of a single government department covering all education and training; a continued commitment to comprehensive, local authority run secondary schools; and a policy of transformation of 14–19 provision in which local authorities and providers are required to develop locally-appropriate proposals for formal collaborative arrangements to deliver the breadth of 14–19 curriculum options required under the Welsh legislation. The policy direction in Wales continues, like that of Scotland, to be based on a national system of public education in which each provider plays to its strengths within a collaborative, rather than competitive,

framework (Rees 2011). The chosen path of the Welsh Assembly Government might thus be characterised as a more explicitly social democratic and egalitarian direction of development, together with a deliberative, gradual and pragmatic reform process focussed on the needs of the learner (see the article by Gunning and Raffe for more detail).

Northern Ireland, like Wales, has traditionally been heavily dependent on English qualifications and largely followed English policy (albeit adapted to the Northern Ireland context) until 2007 when the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly was re-instated. Since then, it has begun to develop its own education policy agenda. However, unlike Wales, there has not been a dominant political direction. Instead, power-sharing has led to an uneasy balance between unionist and republican priorities, which is played out at ministerial level between the Department of Employment and Learning and the Department for Education. Both are currently involved in developing two major 14–19 strategies – the 14–19 Entitlement Framework, which expects all schools to offer a range of general and vocational provision (24 subjects pre-16 and 27 subjects post-16), and the establishment of 14–19 ‘Area Learning Communities’, which are broadly similar to the English and Welsh 14–19 partnerships (DENI 2010). However, these ‘frameworks’ have been templated over complex, traditional and divided school structures. Northern Ireland has a dominant grammar school system and a large number of separate institutions for Protestants and Catholics, which are strongly supported at grassroots level and drive much of the Department of Education’s agenda. Northern Ireland also has its own curriculum and qualifications authority (CCEA), which regulates GCSEs and A levels, and has led the development of awards specifically for local needs. It is possible to view this approach to 14–19 education and training as a variant of New Labour’s boundary-blurring policies. From discussions with civil servants in Northern Ireland, it appears that they are concerned that these fledgling policies could be easily overturned if ministerial changes were made as a result of the election in 2011, particularly in conjunction with a change in 14–19 policy direction in England. 14–19 policy in Northern Ireland thus appears finely poised and could continue on its more collaborative trajectory, supporting learners to mix applied and general education, or revert to a more divided system.

Scotland is different and has had a long-standing distinctive education system. It has a unified structure for education and training with a single Cabinet Secretary responsible for all phases. It also has its own qualifications system and most school and college qualifications are developed and administered by a single awarding body, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). A comprehensive credit and qualifications framework – which claims to be the most developed in Europe – aims to include all qualifications. However, Scotland does not adopt an explicit 14–19 phase as such. Instead, it now arranges education on a 3–18 basis, informed by the key policy document, *Curriculum for excellence* (Scottish Government 2004), which is built around the development of capacities to become ‘successful learners’, ‘confident individuals’, ‘responsible citizens’ and ‘effective contributors’. Changes to 14+ qualifications are also taking place to reflect Curriculum for Excellence. Standard grade and intermediate level qualifications (broadly equivalent to English GCSEs) will be replaced by a new single ‘National Award’ in 2013. Access, Highers and Advanced Awards (broadly equivalent to English A levels) are all being retained, but will be updated (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2010). Institutional arrangements in Scotland are much simpler than in England with the majority of young people studying in comprehensive schools up to the age of 17 and a minority moving into further education colleges for vocational programmes from the age of 16 (Lowe and Gayle 2011). Colleges in Scotland cater for a wide age range. A distinctive Scottish policy agenda has gathered pace since the election of a minority SNP government in 2007, but it builds on a process of change that can be traced back to the 1980s (Raffe 2009). This gradualist approach is in stark contrast to the more erratic, fast-changing and politically-motivated reforms in England.

One way of looking at the policies for 14–19 education and training in the four countries of the UK is to consider the extent to which they have been characterised by ‘divided’, ‘linked’ or ‘unified’ approaches to curriculum, qualifications and organisation (Howieson et al. 1997). New Labour’s 14–19 policies in England, for example, with a focus on blurring the boundaries between general and vocational education and between the roles of schools, colleges and work-based learning providers, while not fundamentally reforming underlying structures, and encouraging choice and competition, might be seen as a ‘linked approach’. Scotland and Wales have, in their different ways, both gradually pursued a more unified direction through, for instance, *Curriculum for excellence* and the *Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification*. Their more comprehensive and unified strategies towards curriculum and qualifications reform have been matched by the pursuit of a more comprehensive approach to organisation. Some have seen this as a result of avoiding much of the English neo-liberal marketised agenda, which began in the late-1980s (Rees 2011). Northern Ireland, having traditionally taken a divided approach to education, could now be seen as pursuing a more linked approach with its 14–19 Entitlement and Area Learning Communities, but this still looks unstable.

The implications of a new UK Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government

The concept of an explicit 14–19 phase of education is no longer in vogue among education ministers in England (see Higham and Yeomans, this issue). On the one hand, support continues for the raising of the participation age to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015 (DfE 2010a), thus suggesting some continuity between pre- and post-16 education, and Professor Alison Wolf was asked to undertake a ‘Review of 14–19 vocational education’ (DfE 2010b). On the other hand, different policies suggest a much clearer division between the education of 11- to 16-year-olds and the education of 16- to 19-year-olds and between the role of schools, associated with the Department for Education (DfE) (e.g., DfE 2010a), and the role of further education colleges, work-based training providers and employers, associated with the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (e.g., BIS 2010).

Nevertheless, change has happened swiftly in a number of areas that impact on 14- to 19-year-olds. Almost immediately upon coming to power, the Coalition Government scrapped the 14–19 entitlement to all 17 lines of Diplomas in every local authority area (DfE 2010c); consigned the final three lines of 14–19 Diplomas, which were intended to support a more applied approach to general education, to the dustbin of history; withdrew money from this area of policy; and replaced support for collaboration between schools, colleges and work-based learning organisations by a much greater emphasis on institutional autonomy and competition between an increasing variety of new education providers, such as academies, studio schools, university technical colleges and free schools (DfE 2010d).

More recently, the publication of the Schools White Paper, *The importance of teaching* (2010a), has reinforced the differences between schools and colleges and pre- and post-16 education by focusing on general education and the introduction of a new performance measure that privileges GCSEs. Entitled the English Baccalaureate (the attainment of five GCSE A*–C grades in English, mathematics, science, a humanity and a language), this new benchmark has already sent out a message to schools that they now need to concentrate on a traditional, subject-based curriculum up to the age of 16, rather than offering the mix of general and applied qualifications associated with New Labour’s linked approach to 14–19 education and training. Less than half a year into a new administration, schools and colleges involved in consortia or 14–19 partnerships have been forced to reconsider both their approaches to the curriculum and their institutional governance options.

The UK Coalition Government approach to 14–19 policy thus appears to be moving England away from a linked education and training system and towards a more divided and marketised one. In our view it is unlikely, however, that Wales and Scotland will deviate from their gradual steps in the direction of a more unified ‘upper secondary’ education system because of the accumulation of devolved powers and the considerable political and professional momentum behind their policies in this area. The position of Northern Ireland is much more difficult to read, because competing political and social forces have been locked into a power-sharing agreement that is aimed primarily at conflict resolution and, according to Northern Ireland policy actors, makes decisive action difficult. Nevertheless, Northern Ireland remains closely tied to England, in terms of its qualifications, and has only had a short period of independent policy-making in the area of education and training. This suggests that political changes in England will eventually have some echoes in the Northern Ireland system.

Key areas for debate

Given the new UK political and economic context, a number of key issues arise, which this special issue discusses.

The first question in terms of a UK-wide analysis is whether there will be further divergence between the education systems of the four countries and what implications this will have for the UK economy and the respective societies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In England, where UK Coalition policy is already having an impact, it may be instructive to consider issues of continuity and break. Historical analysis regarding the transition between the previous Conservative Government and New Labour in the mid-1990s suggested a significant amount of policy continuity. Newman (2001), for example, argued that the new public management of the Thatcher era continued under New Labour in a diluted form in what she referred to as ‘adaptive neo-liberalism’. At this point of political change, a similar question might be posed. How new are the policies of the UK Coalition Government compared with those of New Labour? Some will suggest that several flagship Coalition policies find their roots in the latter years of the previous administration (e.g. Husbands 2010). One obvious example is the promotion of state schools that are independent of local authorities (e.g. academies) and have a high degree of autonomy in terms of their governance, curriculum and admissions policies. However, there are also strong arguments to be made that the Coalition is striking out in a very different direction from the previous government, particularly in relation to higher education policy, funding and the more active promotion of an academic/vocational divide (Hodgson, Spours, and Waring 2011).

There are, however, big system issues in relation to 14–19 education and training that any UK or assembly government will have to address. Recent research suggests that while there are significant differences within the four countries in terms of organisation and governance, policy aims in relation to raising levels of post-16 participation and attainment, for example, are common across the UK (Hodgson, Spours, and Waring 2011). These include:

- How to motivate young people pre-16 and the role and nature of qualifications at 16+.
- What type of curriculum is appropriate for 14- to 19-year-olds.
- The role that Apprenticeships, employers and work-based learning can play in the education and training system for 14- to 19-year-olds.
- Whether higher education should continue to be seen as the major goal at 18+.

- Where young people should study from 14+ and what the role of the different providers should be.
- What form of initial training and ongoing development will be needed for 14–19 education professionals.

A further area of UK debate concerns the financing, governance and organisation of 14–19 education and training. In an era when there will be significantly less funding for education as a result of public expenditure cuts, it is likely that differences will continue to develop between the four countries. While all will have to engage in some austerity measures, policy priorities may vary, as may the way in which education and training is organised and overseen. Key issues here will include:

- How far an education market is stimulated or imposed.
- The balance of decision-making between the national, regional, local and institutional levels.
- How system performance is measured and regulated.
- Which types of learners and provision receive state funding and which do not.
- How to get a better balance of contribution to learning between employers, the state and individuals.
- The role of professionals in policy-making and implementation.

Finally, there is a broader set of debates around how upper secondary education is conceptualised in the four countries of the UK and what it is expected to contribute in terms of economic and wider social benefits. Differences may occur according to whether the education of 14- to 19-year-olds is seen as a distinct phase or is viewed through the lens of life-long learning and what explicit social as well as educational and economic aims it is expected to deliver.

Contributions to the special edition

Major changes are thus afoot across the different education and training systems of the UK. Amidst an unprecedented crisis of public expenditure, the UK Coalition Government has been anxious to reform at a speed that has surprised many. It is important to understand both what is happening and the implications of change for young people, for education professionals and for society more generally.

This special issue aims to contribute to knowledge in this area through a combination of historical analysis (William Richardson and Jeremy Higham and David Yeomans); consideration of the experience of young people (Geoff Hayward and Richard Williams); home international comparison of the education and training systems across the UK (Dennis Gunning and David Raffe); an examination of both general education (Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours) and vocational education and training for 14- to 19-year-olds (Alison Fuller and Lorna Unwin); discussion of the role of teachers and teaching in upper secondary education (Lynne Rogers) and an analysis of the future policy options and possible education and training system trajectories in England, using the other countries of the UK as a lens to enhance analysis (Ann Hodgson and Ken Spours).

Taken overall, these contributions will suggest that the four upper secondary education systems are about to enter a period of uncertainty due to a combination of factors – public expenditure cuts; a new and ideologically motivated UK Coalition Government which will impact particularly in England, together with the prospect of potentially different policy

approaches in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We conclude by asking whether existing differences – economic, social and educational – within and between the nations of the UK will be magnified and, importantly, which groups of young people will benefit and which will lose out as a result of change.

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