

Educating 14- to 19-year-olds in England: a UK lens on possible futures

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Here we draw on recent research and on earlier contributions on convergence and divergence across Great Britain to consider possible future trajectories for 14–19 education and training in England. We use a UK-wide lens to reflect on 14–19 strategies in England by showing how common issues can be tackled in different ways in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The article identifies what could be seen as three models of upper secondary education – Type 1 (England); Type 2 (Scotland and Wales); and Type 3 (Northern Ireland) – that have been part of the picture of divergence. We conclude that the process of divergence is likely to continue in the short-term but, in the longer term, wider political factors could produce post-devolution convergence.

Keywords: UK upper secondary education systems; curriculum and qualifications; governance; policy making; convergence and divergence

Introduction

In this article we explore some of the issues and questions raised at the end of the Editorial, both by drawing on discussion in the various contributions to the special issue and also by reflecting on recent research on post-compulsory education and lifelong learning across the UK (Hodgson, Spours, and Waring 2011). As a frame for our discussion of the future trajectory of 14–19 education and training in England, we begin by examining the common features of the upper secondary education systems in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the similar issues they seek to address. We suggest that these persist and accompany the processes of divergence resulting from historical trends and parliamentary devolution. We then briefly comment on how these issues have been interpreted in somewhat different ways in each of the four countries and ask whether these interpretations, together with recent policies emanating from Westminster, are leading to three different models of upper secondary education: Type 1 England, Type 2 Scotland and Wales and Type 3 Northern Ireland. We conclude the article by considering the future shape of upper secondary education in England under what Spours (2011) has referred to as ‘the austerity state’. We argue that in the short- to medium-term, the process of divergence between the four countries of the UK will continue. Longer-term scenarios will depend on wider economic and political change and, particularly, the addressing of what we term the ‘English question’. Here we argue that if England shifts towards a new type of social democratic

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politics in the future, this could lay the basis for a post-devolution settlement and a possible process of convergence across the four countries of the UK.

Similarities across the UK

Recent research has emphasised divergence between upper secondary education and lifelong learning across the four countries of the UK (Hodgson, Spours, and Waring 2011). We suggest that this may well be the case if one is looking from within the UK and across the whole span of upper secondary education and lifelong learning. However, if the education of 14- to 19-year-olds is examined on its own and from an international standpoint, more obvious commonalities can be detected. The medium of instruction in the majority of the UK is English and all young people have access to free education and training to the age of 19. In all four countries the majority of 14- to 19-year-olds are in full-time education and studying in classrooms rather than in the workplace, with apprenticeship a desired but elusive option. This partly results from the fact that there are no strong social partnership arrangements between employers, unions and education providers as there are, for example, in the Nordic or Germanic systems, and relatively few occupations beyond the professions where licence to practice is required (Hayward and James 2004). In all four countries, governments are trying to increase the quantity and quality of work-based learning, but it is from a low baseline and very difficult to achieve, particularly in a time of recession. General education takes place largely in schools and more vocational or occupational awards are offered in further education colleges. In all four countries, to a greater or lesser extent, steps have been or are being taken to bring schools, colleges and work-based training providers into closer partnership to offer young people a wider range of subjects in the upper secondary phase. The programmes young people study are often very similar, although the awards they are working towards vary to some degree, in particular in Scotland, with its traditional use of 'Standard Grades' and 'Highers' rather than General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) and Advanced Certificates of General Education (A levels). Significantly, subject choice rather than compulsion and a common core of learning is a hallmark of all upper secondary education systems in the UK, with increasing specialisation in the latter part of the phase. This again marks it out from the majority of continental European systems, which have a much larger core of compulsory general education subjects (Clarke and Winch 2007).

As various contributions to this special edition also point out, the major issues faced by all four countries of the UK are very similar. There is a desire for all young people to remain in education and training to the age of 18/19 and a concern about attainment because of low scores in international benchmarks, such as PISA (OECD 2011). All four countries face high levels of youth unemployment that are currently rising (ONS 2011) and, as we suggest in our earlier article, this is posing issues about what skills and knowledge young people need to provide them with the capacities and resilience to enter an unpredictable labour market and to cope with an uncertain future. Allied to this are concerns about how to motivate learners when there may be no clear employment route open to them, with fears of more 14- to 19-year-olds joining the proportion of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) (see Geoff Hayward and Richard Williams, this issue). According to Alison Fuller and Lorna Unwin (this issue), employers are seen as an important social partner in all four countries, but there is no agreement as to how they can be more formally bound into or even play a bigger role in the upper secondary education system. Higher education has been a major 'pull through' factor for 14- to 19-year-olds over the past two decades in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but as the economy

experienced recession and then slow growth, a question has arisen over how affordable it will be to continue expanding this tertiary phase of education. Finally, as Lynne Rogers points out, there is a UK debate both about what type of initial teacher training and continuing professional education is most appropriate for those who work with 14- to 19-year-olds and what it means to be a professional in the upper secondary phase.

Both in terms of system features and of the debates taking place between education policy-makers, professionals and researchers, therefore, the four countries of the UK display considerable similarities. Moreover, as we have seen, all are affected by the state of the UK economy. Where the systems are diverging, however, are around the policies and mechanisms that are being used to shape system features and to address these key common issues.

Towards three different models of upper secondary education within the UK?

The Editorial has already outlined the main features of each of the upper secondary education systems in the UK and other contributions have elaborated on these within one or more of the four countries. Here we consider four major areas of debate on 14–19 education and training in England where the other three countries of the UK take somewhat different policy approaches. This leads us to pose a question as to whether these differences are leading to the emergence of three models of upper secondary education within the UK. We use the term model to refer to the major features of an education and training (ET) system, such as its curriculum and qualifications approach, institutional arrangements and governance and policy framework, which we recognise are shaped by the political and socio-economic contexts within which ET systems operate.

Aims and purposes

Others in this special edition have argued that there is a common concern across the UK and internationally about raising levels of participation and attainment in upper secondary education, primarily because these are seen as part of a broader strategy for economic competitiveness. However, the extent to which these aims are given primacy varies across the UK. In England, under New Labour, system performance was a prime policy objective and there was very little, if any, debate about the broader aims and purposes of 14–19 education and training, despite the fact that raising the age of participation in education and training to 18 by 2015 was enshrined in legislation (Pring et al. 2009)

In Wales through *14–19 learning pathways* (WAG 2002) and in Scotland through *Curriculum for excellence* (Scottish Government 2004), a more active public debate was conducted on the capacities young people should develop within the phase and the important role that education needed to play in creating the citizens of the future. Although the latter document has also been criticised by some for its vagueness and confusion (e.g., Paterson 2007). In both these countries too, as in Northern Ireland, there is no statutory raising of the leaving age. Rather, the policy emphasis is on creating attractive and relevant programmes that will encourage young people to stay on in education and training. In addition, 14–19 education is seen much more overtly as part of a larger system of lifelong learning. In Northern Ireland there was a protracted public debate about the aims and purposes of the national curriculum, as might be expected in a country that had suffered centuries of division and wanted to emphasise the role of education as part of the peace process. It is unclear how much impact this had on the upper secondary phase, however, which is still dominated by external examinations (Gallagher 2010).

In terms of aims and purposes for the phase, therefore, there is a distinction to be made between England, on the one hand, and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, on the other.

Approaches to curriculum and qualifications – towards more divided or more unified systems?

A related but more starkly delineating issue is the approach that the four countries of the UK have taken and continue to take to curriculum and qualifications. As earlier contributions have indicated, Wales and Scotland both have a unified qualifications framework – the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, respectively – which runs across all types of learning within the upper secondary phase. They have also both experimented with Baccalaureates, although only Wales has pursued this in a way that affects the whole 14–19 system. Nevertheless, both developments suggest a desire in these two countries for a more unified approach to curriculum and qualifications than that taken in England.

England has also developed a credit framework – the Qualifications and Curriculum Framework – but this does not currently extend to general qualifications, nor to the majority of awards taken by 14- to 19-year-olds. Moreover, the recent *Review of vocational education* by Alison Wolf (2011) was highly critical of the QCF and recommended that it should not be used as a way of accrediting learning in upper secondary education. Furthermore, as we have noted in our earlier article on general education, while New Labour brought in measures to encourage broadening of study at advanced level and the mixing of general and vocational qualifications from 14+, including the development of 14 lines of Diplomas at Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced Levels, they also rejected the ideas from the Tomlinson Working Group (2004) for a unified Diploma system that would have covered the whole of the upper secondary phase. New Labour's 'bureaucratic assemblage' approach was underpinned by the desire to simplify 14–19 education and training to four major routes – GCSEs and A levels; the Diplomas; Apprenticeship; and Foundation Learning (the preparatory route for those not ready for the first three). However, there was also a blurring of boundaries between the four, both because it was possible to mix aspects of the first two routes and because theoretically there were opportunities for moving between routes from the age of 16.

The Coalition Government has gone further towards creating a more divided 14–19 system in England. Access to general education has been narrowed through reducing modularity in GCSEs and A levels; increasing the 'academic' content within them and introducing the English Baccalaureate performance measure that only takes account of the higher grades in GCSE in five prescribed subjects. Development of the three more general diplomas – science, humanities and social sciences and languages and communication – has also been halted (DfE 2010a), thus removing one of the links between general and applied education. At the same time, Apprenticeships are being more closely aligned with the workplace and programme led apprenticeships, the majority of which were delivered in further education colleges, have been discontinued (NAS 2011).

As we suggest below, when this more sharply delineated triple-track system is combined with an emphasis on institutional differentiation and choice, we can see the beginnings of a possible tri-partite upper secondary system in England that looks very different to the more unified curricular and institutional approaches in Wales and Scotland. The introduction by the Coalition Government of the English Baccalaureate performance indicator, comprising the higher GCSE grades in English, mathematics, history/geography, science and a language

other than English, could also be viewed as marking a further distinction between the upper secondary education system in England and those in the other three countries of the UK. As we have noted earlier, UK 14–19 systems have historically favoured an elective approach to the curriculum with students free to make up their programmes of study from a range of qualifications. The privileging of five traditional subjects in the English Baccalaureate arguably introduces the beginnings of an element of compulsion and a reduction in free choice within the English system. Currently the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, somewhat disingenuously, stresses the autonomy of schools in deciding what to offer 14- to 19-year-olds (DfE 2010b). However, as we argue in our article on general education, when the English Baccalaureate is seen as the prime measure of performance at the end of Key Stage 4, it is not surprising that many schools are now considering how many learners should be advised to take these five subjects.

Northern Ireland could possibly be seen as following a slightly different path to those taken in the other countries of the UK, but drawing on developments in all of them. In terms of qualifications, Northern Ireland might be described as a local variant of the English system, which historically was similar to the position of Wales. The system is dominated by GCSEs and A levels regulated by the curriculum and qualifications body, CCEA, although it also has an open market in awards. CCEA qualifications have to be of equivalent standard to those in England and have comparable subject material, although in areas like Citizenship there are significant differences. Northern Ireland is also a partner in the England, Wales and Northern Ireland QCF. There have, however, been more radical moves to reform the curriculum for 14- to 19-year-olds as a result of the development of an Entitlement Framework, which stipulates that for 14- to 16-year-olds, all schools must offer 24 subjects, a third of which are academic, a third applied/vocational and a third of either type. Post-16, providers have to offer 27 subjects in the same categories (DENI 2010). The thinking behind the Entitlement Framework has been similar to that in England under New Labour, Wales and Scotland; that is that a greater choice of qualifications in the upper secondary phase will motivate young people by providing an alternative for those students who learn in different ways, do not achieve highly in general education and/or do not want to pursue a narrow academic programme. At the same time, it also aims to assist higher attainers to develop employability skills. In this sense, the Entitlement Framework could be viewed as an attempt to address the needs of all young people, moving Northern Ireland closer towards the more unified curriculum and qualifications approach taken in Scotland and Wales.

How far an education market is stimulated or imposed – collaboration versus competition

A similar picture of Wales and Scotland at one end of the spectrum, England at the other and Northern Ireland taking a different approach determined by its unique historical legacy, can also be detected in relation to institutional arrangements. Wales and Scotland, as the article by Dennis Gunning and David Raffe suggests, have both resisted the neo-liberal push to marketise the education system that began in England in the late 1980s under Margaret Thatcher and continued throughout the New Labour era from 1997–2010. Instead of diversifying their school system by the introduction of specialist schools, sixth form colleges and academies, they have both retained the concept of comprehensive community schools. While falling rolls in Wales have created some competition between providers for higher performing 16- to 19-year-olds, this tendency has been softened to a considerable degree by the formation of 14–19 partnerships between schools and colleges to deliver the broad range of learning opportunities required under the 14–19 Pathways programme.

In England the picture is very different. Competition between upper secondary education providers is not only rife, but seen by policy-makers as a way of forcing up standards and performance (DfE 2010b). To the academies and specialist schools introduced under New Labour, the New Coalition Government has added free schools, studio schools and university technical colleges and has an ambition to increase dramatically the number of these schools that gain funding directly from central government, rather than via local authorities (DfE 2010c). The rather weak and often financially driven 14–19 Partnerships that were set up under New Labour, primarily to deliver the new Diplomas, are rapidly falling apart as schools and colleges become more inwardly focused on viability in a climate of reduced budgets for 14–19 provision (IOE 2010). What seems likely as a result of the latest Education White Paper (DfE 2010b) with its focus on schools and general education, and the Wolf Review (Wolf 2011) recommending clear distinctions between Apprenticeship in the workplace and broad vocational qualifications being delivered by further education colleges or university technical colleges, is the second strand of a move to a more clearly delineated tri-partite system.

In Northern Ireland, as a result of its history and politics, schools are still mainly organised on religious grounds. State schools (controlled schools) are largely Protestant, while the maintained sector is largely Catholic. Historically, the Protestant state sector was dominant, but now there are more students in the Catholic maintained sector. In addition, the school system is still highly divided along ability lines. Grammar schools cater for about 30 per cent of the cohort, which is far higher than in England. There is a smaller integrated sector, which straddles the communities and is not selective, but it only features in certain parts of Northern Ireland. Mirroring a dominant and complex school system is a further education college sector, which mainly caters for those beyond the age of 19 and those wanting to take vocational qualifications. There are no sixth form colleges in Northern Ireland. The legacies of the grammar school system have contributed to a strong division of labour between schools and colleges. Schools are largely responsible for general education and colleges for vocational education and lifelong learning (although a minority still offer A Levels for those students who do not want a school environment). However, to encourage schools and colleges to work together to facilitate the delivery of the Entitlement Framework, the Department of Education in Northern Ireland has established an area-based planning process through the development of 30 local 14–19 Area Learning Communities, which are similar to the 14–19 Partnerships in Wales and the looser partnership arrangements in Scotland encouraged by the Scottish Executive (2005).

In summary, the upper secondary education institutional arrangements in England stand out as being considerably differentiated and competitive with the distinct possibility of a move to a tripartite system as collaboration declines and institutional diversity and competition increase. In contrast, the Scottish and Welsh systems appear both more comprehensive and collaborative. The institutional arrangements in Northern Ireland continue to remain selective and sectarian with a clear division of labour between schools and colleges, but there are moves towards a more collaborative approach through the 14–19 Entitlement.

Governance and policy-making

Finally, there are considerable differences between the way that governance and policy-making are undertaken in the four countries of the UK that tend to reinforce the distinctions between the three models of upper secondary education outlined above. In Scotland and Wales the upper secondary education system is governed through a balance of national government, local government and institutional decision-making and, partly due to the small size

of both these countries, actively involves practitioners in the policy process (James 2011). A more measured pace for reform and a willingness to publicly debate education issues lies at the heart of the Scottish and Welsh approaches to policy-making and might be seen as part of a more inclusive social democratic politics (Hodgson, Spours, and Waring 2011), although Gunning and Raffe in their contribution to this special edition also point to the fact that this can be ‘an excuse for inertia and conservatism’.

In England, despite the rhetoric in both New Labour (DfES 2005) and Coalition (DfE 2010b) policy documents about the importance of local authority oversight over the 14–19 curriculum, the role and power of local authorities in education has been reduced over recent decades and is not as strong as it is in Scotland and Wales. Moreover, this trend is likely to continue as more schools become academies or free schools and receive their funding via the newly established Education Funding Authority, housed within the Department for Education, rather than through local authorities. Already, many staff in local authority education departments in England are being made redundant as these organisations downsize and reconfigure or outsource their services to cope with reduced budgets and fewer responsibilities (BBC News 2011a). The pace of the policy process in education, both under New Labour (Coffield et al. 2008), but even more so under the Coalition Government (witness the short timeframe for the Wolf Review of 14-19 Qualifications – September 2010/February 2011 – and the retrospective use of the English Baccalaureate performance measure to judge schools) means that there is no time for education professionals to play an active part in policy-making, no time for debate and no time for evaluation of new initiatives. 14–19 education and training has become a highly political and politicised area (Raffe and Spours 2007). As we point out in our earlier article on general education, it is the powerful policy levers associated with new public management, such as inspection, funding and performance measures, that are used to mould institutional behaviour in England.

From conversations with policy-makers and researchers in Northern Ireland in December 2010, again it appears that the situation in relation to policy-making and governance is somewhat different. The period of the ‘Troubles’ meant that some of the Thatcherite reforms that affected England effectively bypassed Northern Ireland because it became the focus of UK government investment. Northern Ireland also has a particular form of governance arising from the Peace Process with an emphasis on power-sharing and gaining cross-party consensus for all major policies as part of the process of conflict resolution. Several of those interviewed suggested that this has helped to reduce conflict, but has not produced effective government. Too many issues, we were told, get stuck, reforms funder and there is a lack of decisive decision-making.

It is difficult not to conclude, therefore, that despite the similar features of the four UK upper secondary education systems described earlier and the common issues they all have to face, three distinct models of upper secondary education have begun to emerge as a result of the different political approaches and policy mechanisms that are used in each of the countries to tackle these: Type 1 – a more divided tri-partite approach taken in England; Type 2 – a more comprehensive and unified approach associated with Scotland and Wales; and Type 3 – a more mixed model in Northern Ireland that combines features of the first two types.

Short and long-term scenarios – towards a new post-devolution settlement?

In a recent publication (Hodgson, Spours, and Waring 2011), we argued that there were three possible scenarios for post-compulsory education and lifelong learning across the UK. The first involved the establishment of a successful education market based on the

reduced role of the state and the second on the failure of the market and an impoverished education and training system. These scenarios emanated from the policies of a UK Coalition Government that wields economic power over the UK as a whole, but educational power over England only. A third scenario involved what was termed a 'new post-devolution settlement' that depended, in the first instance, on a political shift taking place in England, but also changes taking place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in relation to what Raffe (2011) referred to as the 'democratic challenges' of political devolution.

In this final section, we re-examine this argument based on a number of factors – a focus on the highly socially contested area of 14-19 education and training; the unfolding economic crisis across the UK and the effects this is having on a generation of young people, allied to the different configurations of the education state and differing versions of democracy in the four countries of the UK. We suggest that this will lead to two possible futures. In the short- or medium-term there is likely to be increased divergence that will further consolidate the upper secondary systems of the UK into the three types outlined earlier. In the longer-term, however, it is possible to envisage trends for convergence that could reinforce the existing UK-wide features of the respective systems with a set of political changes that may result in a single system with four national variants.

Future I. From managed divergence and towards greater division?

Under New Labour there was from 1999 onwards a decade of 'managed divergence' through political devolution; the Barnett Formula, increased public expenditure and incremental steps in distributing further powers for Scotland, Wales and latterly, Northern Ireland (Hodgson, Spours, and Waring 2011). In the area of education this allowed increasing differences to occur in the organisation of provision and in the funding of educational priorities. In one sense, managed divergence was a New Labour project to protect the UK union (Pearce 2011), but it was also a pluralist one. It reflected political pressure from diverse forces in Scotland and Wales, in particular, for greater political and economic independence (Hassan 2011).

The process of managed divergence came to an end prior to the General Election of 2010. The Labour Party had been losing its political grip in both Scotland and Wales in the preceding years, but it was the banking crisis of 2008 that brought this project to a close. Everything became dominated by economics in an era of the 'austerity state' (Spours 2011). The first political beneficiaries in the UK were the Right as they succeeded in turning a crisis of the global banking system into a crisis of UK public expenditure. The newly elected Conservative-led Coalition Government set in motion an economic policy that sought dramatic public expenditure cuts, but with consequent effects on economic growth and levels of unemployment among young people in particular (ONS 2011). These economic measures applied to all the countries of the UK.

As argued earlier, the UK Coalition Government has also promoted education policies that primarily affect England and these have combined with the UK-wide economic measures to consolidate a Type I model of upper secondary education in England. At the same time, the Government is embarking on public service reform around the Big Society agenda (BBC News 2011b), which combines democratic arguments about citizen involvement with greater roles for private and third sector organisations to push back the role of the state; an approach to local governance we have termed 'laissez-faire localism' (Hodgson and Spours 2010). This poses a considerable political and ideological challenge for the Labour Party in England (Lawson 2010) and for the devolved administrations that

have been accused of having neglected a democratic agenda by being too uncritical of professional elites (Raffe 2011). Nevertheless, in response to the Westminster agenda, administrations in both Scotland and Wales are likely to hold a steady course of policy pursued before and since political devolution and may attempt to translate the new economic realities according to their prevailing political values, historical system features and reform priorities.

The most significant changes will take place in England as five related factors could produce an overall shrinkage or retrenchment of provision. The first concerns the effects of the more sharply delineated divisions between general and vocational education. As these two upper secondary routes become more narrowly defined, so learners are invited to take greater risks to enter and succeed in them. Both become less accessible, albeit in their different ways. Second, at the same time, alternative middle-track applied qualifications, which were encouraged under New Labour, have been talked down by government and selector universities (Shepherd 2011; Russell Group 2011; Wolf 2011) thus discouraging students from taking these awards. A swathe of provision, covering about 40% of the cohort post-16, is no longer a policy priority, with less incentive for institutions to offer it. Added to this is a third powerful, financial factor: public expenditure cuts are beginning to bite, particularly in the further education sector, which has traditionally stepped in to fill gaps in provision. The capacity of further education colleges to act as a substitute for the relative absence of employer involvement in the English upper secondary education system could therefore be diminished. Fourth, it is highly unlikely that employers can respond with significantly more Apprenticeship places at a time when the economy is stagnating or growing at a very low rate. Finally, the potential for students to drive the system by demand will also be diminished as a result of the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance for 16- to 19-year-olds and a diminution of the 'pull through' effect of higher education as course fees rise. Under these circumstances, the raising of the participation age in England could become a symbolic measure, as increasing numbers of young people find themselves excluded from the high status A level and Apprenticeship routes, unwilling to enter lower status provision or without appropriate courses. One likely outcome is an increase in those classified as not in education, employment or training (NEET). The English upper secondary phase could thus move from a school/college-led, high-volume system to one which is lower-volume, more privatised and more polarised.

The same economic pressures will apply to other countries of the UK: all will have slow growth, reduced public expenditure and high youth unemployment. In fact, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland could be hardest hit by expenditure cuts because their economies are more reliant on the public sector. At the same time, as the previous section shows, they are likely to respond according to their Type 2 or Type 3 models of upper secondary education, resulting in limited but important effects. Scotland and Wales have powers to set education budgets and, even with reduced finances, may well decide to distribute them in different ways to those taken in England. It is at this point that greater divergence will occur as different aims for upper secondary education, different qualifications systems, different modes of organisation and governance and a continuing mass role for higher education combine. This could confirm the features of Type 2 upper secondary education systems - less internally differentiated; closer to the communities being served; and placing a greater priority on equity of outcome between different social groups. Scotland and Wales may thus become higher volume, education-led and more unified public systems than those in England, with policies focused on the whole age group rather than on segments of it. Northern Ireland's position with regard to its education and training system is different - hence our earlier description of it as Type 3. Its longer-term future

depends on the reconciliation of sectarianism and its relationship with the Republic. In the short term, however, it is likely to remain closely aligned with the English education system.

Future 2. A new post-devolution settlement and the issue of England

Longer-term scenarios depend on wider economic and political developments across the UK and, in particular, the resolution of the issue of England (Hassan 2010). It is possible that the effects of a protracted economic crisis could eventually produce political shifts to the centre-left in England. What will transpire in the longer-term, however, will arguably depend on developments within the Labour Party because it is the only party that is represented across the UK that could offer an alternative to the current Conservative-led Coalition. But this means Labour developing a distinctive English reform agenda.

England's neo-liberal path of reform over the last 30 years has been a central cause of divergence according to Gunning and Raffé's contribution to this volume and, therefore, it will be the reform of the English system that will be at the centre of any new post-devolution settlement between the countries of the UK. At the wider political level, the Labour Party has yet to develop a distinctive English narrative, although this is beginning to emerge from sections of the Left (e.g., Cruddas and Rutherford 2011). As part of this, it also has to develop a democratic approach to the state to meet the challenge of the Big Society agenda and to decide whether it is in favour of changes to the electoral system that would support the election of a centre-left coalition. The same level of uncertainty applies to Labour's economic and education reform. Ed Miliband, Labour's leader, has indicated that he wishes to break with New Labour, but a coherent set of policies and a distinctively new approach to politics have yet to emerge.

The challenges confronting Labour will also face the assemblies in Scotland and Wales, who may have full Labour administrations after the May 2011 elections. The austerity resulting from the banking crisis and Coalition policy will mean that it will not be easy to fund social democratic policy priorities and the culture of professional elites will be ideologically challenged by the Big Society agenda. But the real responsibility for change will lie with the English to bring their country to a possible point of convergence with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. If Labour were to embrace forms of educational organisation that were strongly collaborative; an approach to qualifications that was more unified and a new type of Apprenticeship that was based on principles of social partnership, there would be an entirely new basis for policy dialogue across the UK.

Even if England is able to shift from an openly neo-liberal model, however, this does not mean that the four countries of the UK will arrive at uniform system features because of the weight of historical, organisational and cultural difference. Nevertheless, the resolution of the English question could signal the beginning of a new era in 'post-devolution politics' and the longer-term emergence of a single UK upper secondary education model with its four national variants

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