

14–19 education across Great Britain – convergence or divergence?

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This article reviews recent policies for 14–19 learning in Wales and Scotland, and discusses the extent to which these policies have diverged from England following parliamentary devolution in 1999. It distinguishes different types of divergence and suggests that many policy differences have not been about major issues of educational philosophy or political principle but rather about different ways in which similar policy strands have been woven together in distinct agendas or programmes, and about associated differences in policy styles. Current policy differences do not necessarily indicate divergence; significant policy differences already existed in 1999.

Keywords: devolution; policy divergence; 14–19 learning; Scotland; Wales

Introduction

Researchers studying the impact of the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament on education and training policies have focused on the extent to which they have stimulated policy divergence (Finlay and Egan 2004; Menter, Brisard, and Smith 2006; Raffe 2006; Rees 2007, 2011; Keep, Payne, and Rees 2010; Hodgson, Spours, and Waring 2011). Their conclusions are typically mixed; they find evidence of divergence but they also identify factors which constrain this divergence and even encourage convergence in some areas. Few have gone so far as Greer (2007) in his description of the devolution settlement as a ‘fragile divergence machine’. Nevertheless, policy divergence has provided the framing question for research on devolution within the UK, much as policy convergence has provided the framing question for many analyses of globalisation. In this article¹ we review policies for 14- to 19-year-olds since 1999 in Wales and Scotland, and we contrast these with policy trends in England, discussed elsewhere in this issue. We ask to what extent, and in what ways, 14–19 policies have diverged across the different countries of Great Britain, and especially between Wales and Scotland on the one hand and England on the other. We also ask to what extent such divergence as has occurred is the product of parliamentary devolution. The same questions could be asked in relation to Northern Ireland, where the 1998 Belfast Agreement helped to create a new policy climate (Donnelly, McKeown, and Osborne 2006), but the checks and balances of power-sharing and the suspension of the Assembly from 2002–2007 have limited the direct impact of parliamentary devolution on education policy (Osborne 2006, 2007).

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We focus on *parliamentary devolution*, the transfer of power in 1999 from Westminster to the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament. We distinguish this from *administrative devolution*, the earlier trend for Welsh and Scottish education to be administered separately by the UK government. Most of the powers which were devolved to the new Assembly and Parliament in 1999 had already been administratively devolved to the Welsh and Scottish Offices. In Wales this was a comparatively recent experience; Welsh education had been largely assimilated within an 'England and Wales' system before education began to be devolved to the Welsh Office in 1970, with the process accelerating after the 1988 Education Reform Act and the establishment of a separate Welsh National Curriculum. Scotland, by contrast, has a separate education system, many parts of which have never been administered on a UK-wide basis. However, only since the early 1990s, when higher education and training were devolved, has the whole of Scottish education been administered separately. As a result, the home countries were already pursuing different education policies in 1999, even if the extent and significance of these differences are contested (Paterson 2003; Keating 2005).

We therefore distinguish between policy *differences* that existed before parliamentary devolution and any *divergence* that may have followed it. We also distinguish different types of divergence. In discussing the impact of globalisation Green (1999) distinguishes between policy convergence and structural convergence, suggesting that although global policy discourses may lead policy objectives and rhetorics to converge, there are continuing wide differences in the structures, processes and outcomes of education. This distinction may be applied to divergence as well as to convergence. Bennett (1991) identifies five types of convergence (or divergence): respectively in the goals, contents, instruments, outcomes or style of policy. In this paper we distinguish three main types of divergence. The first is divergence in respect of key issues of educational philosophy or political principle: for example, concerning the role of markets in steering educational change, or the extent to which academic and vocational learning should be integrated. This roughly corresponds to Green's policy divergence or Bennett's divergence of policy goals. The second type is what we term programme divergence: even when countries pursue similar broad goals, they may develop increasingly distinct agendas and programmes in which similar policy strands are woven together in distinctive ways. Keep, Payne and Rees (2010) make a similar distinction when discussing skills policy. Programme convergence roughly corresponds to Bennett's divergence of policy contents and instruments, and to some aspects of Green's structural divergence. It is closely associated with the third type, divergence of policy style. This is described by Bennett (1991, 218) as 'the process by which policy responses are formulated (consensual or conflictual, incremental or rational, anticipatory or reactive, corporatist or pluralist, etc)', and more narrowly by Greer and Jarman (2008, 167) as 'the repeated choice of policy tools'. We do not discuss the divergence of policy outcomes in this paper, although this is an increasingly salient issue in debates around devolution (Reynolds 2008; Paterson 2009).

We revisit these three types in the final section of the paper. We first review trends in 14–19 policy in Wales and Scotland.

Policy-making structures and processes

Before parliamentary devolution, most education and training legislation passed in Westminster covered England and Wales together and Scotland separately. The devolution settlement continued the contrasting treatments of Wales and Scotland, with the National Assembly for Wales having both more limited scope and more limited autonomy than the

Scottish Parliament. The 2006 Government of Wales Act allowed the National Assembly to enact legislation, known as Assembly Measures, but only if it had been granted enabling powers by Westminster. Only in 2011 did the Assembly acquire full legislative powers. The Scottish Parliament, by contrast, had such powers from the start. In both countries elections were held under a proportional representation (additional member) system. The Labour Party has dominated the Welsh elections, and has led all administrations since 1999, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats in 1999–2003, on its own in 2003–2007 and in coalition with Plaid Cymru in 2007–2011. The first two Scottish elections, in 1999 and 2003, resulted in Labour–Liberal Democrat Coalition Governments. In 2007 the SNP, with one seat more than Labour, formed a minority government. It needed cross-party support for its legislation and its spending plans, but its executive powers provided considerable latitude in policy-making.

The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) consists of the governing Ministers and civil service in Wales, accountable to the elected National Assembly for Wales. Within the WAG a single executive department, the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS), has responsibility for education and training, including the 14–19 Learning Pathways policy and its implementation. DCELLS' responsibilities include both policy and delivery because, unlike other parts of the United Kingdom, almost all non-departmental public bodies ('quangos') have been absorbed into the WAG; the education and skills inspectorate remains as a separate public body. Although responsibility for qualifications regulation lies within DCELLS and there is a distinctive Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW), Further Education (FE) Colleges and work-based learning providers in Wales operate within the English awarding body system while for schools there is a choice, with the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) being a long-standing Wales-based school awarding body and solely responsible for the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification. Twenty-two elected local authorities are responsible for the delivery of school education; the vast majority of schools in Wales are within the local authority system. The 20 FE institutions are statutory corporations with boards of governors, while a range of independently-governed training providers also operate in Wales, some indigenous and some as arms of UK-wide providers. School provision up to age 16 is mostly funded by the general WAG grant to local authorities, whereas post-16 provision, including senior secondary and FE courses and apprenticeships, is funded by a separate system which funds learning at the same rate, whichever sector delivers it. As in Scotland, schools, colleges and work-based training have distinct missions and institutional logics although government policy in Wales is driving increasing collaboration between the sectors, especially on 14–19 learning. Differences between types of schools and between types of colleges are far smaller than in England.

In Scotland, policy responsibility for the education and training of 14- to 19-year-olds has been more dispersed. '14–19' is not a recognised phase in Scottish education. Beyond 16, the system is organised around institutional sectors rather than age groups. Young people leave school at 16, 17 or 18; leaving school – rather than reaching a given age – remains a key transition in Scottish education and is the basis of participation and attainment statistics. School and post-school learning come under different directorates of the Scottish government; before 2007 they came under different cabinet ministers. Schools, colleges and work-based training have distinct missions and institutional logics. Each sector is relatively uniform: as in Wales, differences between types of schools (or between types of colleges) are far smaller than in England. Each sector is funded through a different mechanism by a different body. Schools are administered by 32 local authorities, whose powers were increased in 2007 by a Concordat which granted them single-line budgets to deliver 'single outcome agreements'. Colleges are autonomous bodies funded through the Scottish Funding Council, which also funds the universities. Work-based programmes are funded by Skills

Development Scotland. In contrast to Wales, these funding bodies are quangos, separate from the government; other quangos with significant policy roles include the Scottish Education Quality and Improvement Agency (provisional title – to be formed in 2011 from the merger of the Inspectorate and the main curriculum development body) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

Both countries are claimed to have a more collaborative, consensual and consistent style of policy-making than England. The different scale and institutional complexity of their education systems, their different political traditions and the different histories, composition and values of their policy communities all result in different policy styles. In Wales a policy approach based on collaboration, learner entitlement and an inclusive qualification has fitted well with the dominant political mood with its roots in the country's industrial and social heritage (especially in South Wales) and in the role of the Labour Party and workers' organisations such as trade unions, workers' institutes and the Workers' Educational Association. It has created a value-base for a consistent education philosophy, despite the considerable political mood swings that have taken place over the last thirty years in Westminster. The consistency of policy is further underpinned by the stability of government department structures and low turnover of ministers, in contrast with the frequent changes of structures and ministers in England. A relatively consistent policy approach has also been evident in Scotland, which has avoided the more radical approaches to public service provision followed in England since 1999, and where the change of government in 2007 did not lead to changes in policy direction of the kind that followed the change of UK government in 2010. Scottish educational policy-making has been variously represented as collaborative (Raffe and Spours 2007), as a top-down process directed by a leadership class (Humes 1986), as a balance of pluralism and corporatism (McPherson and Raab 1988) and as an example of provider capture (Paterson 2003, 2009); significantly, these different interpretations largely pre-date parliamentary devolution. In practice Scottish educational policy-making is a combination of all of these. Providers and professional bodies are influential in policy communities (Greer and Jarman 2008), contributing to an incremental, informal and consensual policy style, which may appear participative but which often leads to inertia or conservatism and does not guarantee significant 'bottom-up' influence (Raffe and Spours 2007; Humes 2008). In Wales the minister recently criticised the complacency of the education system: a small country may facilitate good collaborative working but people 'are reluctant to rock the boat' (Andrews 2011).

14–19 Policy aims

Despite – or perhaps because of – its more limited devolved powers, the National Assembly for Wales has been much readier to assert the distinctiveness and Welsh character of its policies. The ministerial foreword in *The Learning Country* (NAfW 2001), the strategic 'paving document' published by the first administration, states: 'We shall take our own policy direction where necessary, to get the best for Wales'. The former First Minister of Wales, Rhodri Morgan (2002), saw 'clear red water' between policies in Wales and those of the Labour Government in Westminster. His successor, Carwyn Jones, claimed that 'we do it differently in Wales... We are proud to remain true to our principles on such things as comprehensive education' (Jones 2010). This underlined the relative stability of policy-making in Wales and the greater continuity with the principles that drove policy before parliamentary devolution.

14–19 education was seen as one of the areas in which a distinctive direction would be taken, while at the same time recognising that some of the infrastructure for Wales, such as the qualifications system, remained largely tied to that of England. *The Learning Country* stated

the intention to ‘press ahead to transform provision for 14 to 19 year olds, so that within an overall curriculum entitlement, artificial barriers are broken down to meet the demands of learning in a new century’. As one means of breaking these barriers, it also reaffirmed the proposal to ‘pilot a Welsh Bacalaureate to provide the breadth and experience so critical to young people if they are to make their way in the world – and to take it in much greater numbers than currently achieve advanced academic or vocational qualifications’.

The *14–19 Learning Pathways* policy aimed to develop wider curriculum choice and better learner support so that each learner could build a programme that reflected their preferred learning style and future pathway. This was to be delivered through:

- the development of a wider range of applied and vocational options;
- the offer of a learning core, including personal and social education and work-related education;
- access to impartial learning coaching and careers advice and guidance; and
- collaboration between local providers to maximise choice and minimise duplication.

The policy has been closely related to the Welsh Bacalaureate Qualification (WBQ), the Learning and Skills Measure and the Transformation Framework, described below. These four measures define the main features of 14–19 policy in Wales as it has developed since 1999.

There is not the same clarity about 14–19 policy in Scotland. As noted above, ‘14–19’ is not an organising concept in Scottish education and there is consequently no ‘14–19 policy’, so described. Young people in this age range are affected by several different policy agendas, whose objectives include: boosting attainment and participation; engaging the disengaged; reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET); modernising the curriculum and increasing its focus on skills, especially generic skills; enhancing the quality, relevance and status of vocational learning; increasing flexibility; addressing inequalities; and, more generally, responding to the perceived needs of a knowledge economy and of citizenship in a participative democracy. These objectives are similar to those of cognate policies in Wales and, indeed, elsewhere in the UK, and reflect the common challenges facing the UK nations as well as the influence of UK-wide and global policy discourses. However, there are particular Scottish concerns. Scotland has one of the OECD’s highest proportions of NEET young people (Scottish Executive 2006). Social inequalities have tended to be wider than in the rest of the UK, at least during the post-compulsory years (Raffe et al. 2006; Paterson and Iannelli 2007). An OECD review team visited Scotland in 2007 and identified two main challenges for schools: an ‘achievement gap’ that appeared in the late primary years and widened thereafter, and low and socially unequal participation and attainment in post-compulsory learning (OECD 2007). It recommended a broader curriculum, more opportunities for vocational learning, and the delegation of powers to enable schools to innovate.

Strengthening the institutional base

In both countries policies since 1999 may be summarised in terms of four broad trends. The first is a desire to strengthen the institutional base, and especially to encourage more collaborative partnerships. In Wales, a continuing commitment to the concept of community-based comprehensive education is matched by an increased willingness to interpret this concept in terms of institutional partnerships. In 2009 the WAG’s Transformation Framework sought proposals from local authorities and other providers for collaborative approaches to the

delivery of post-16 learning which would increase choice for learners and reduce duplication of provision. An implementation schedule was produced, with the threat of 'a more interventionist approach' should proposed changes be inadequate (DCELLS 2009).

A range of models of collaboration have been proposed in response. In some areas, tertiary institutions have been proposed, particularly in the small local authority areas in the South Wales valleys, some involving higher education and economic regeneration as well; others have proposed formal collaborative arrangements including shared governance of post-16 provision between local authorities and FE colleges. In addition, six proposals for mergers between FE institutions were submitted, of which four had been implemented by the end of 2010, and two rural local authorities have proposed extensive reorganisation of secondary school provision in addition to the establishment of links with post-school providers. There are formidable hurdles to be overcome to translate transformation proposals into action, especially if they involve changes to school provision that require statutory consultation at local level ahead of a ministerial decision. Proposed changes to secondary school provision have not been without controversy, especially where schools have seen the proposals as a loss of autonomy over their own Sixth Form rather than as the setting up of shared provision planned, managed and delivered in a local consortium.

Scottish policy has been more conservative in maintaining existing institutional roles and missions. As in Wales, Scottish governments have remained committed to the model of community-based comprehensive school. Parents may choose a school outside their catchment area but school choice is not used to drive school improvement. 'Our comprehensive education system is right for Scotland... No one in Scotland should be required to select a school to get the first rate education they deserve and are entitled to' (Scottish Executive 2004a, 2). The first two devolved governments introduced New Community Schools (subsequently Integrated Community Schools) to promote inter-agency collaboration and Schools of Ambition with additional funding to promote innovation, but these did not develop curriculum specialisations or spearhead a move towards greater school diversity, as in England. (The Schools of Ambition programme was abolished by the SNP government.) The colleges' roles have evolved since 1999 (Thomson 2008) but the sector's status and integrity have not been in question. A government-led *Review of Scotland's Colleges* in 2005–2007 celebrated their contributions to learners, the economy and society; its recommendations aimed to clarify and enhance their mission rather than make structural changes (Scottish Government 2007). Colleges and schools have been encouraged to form partnerships to exploit their complementary strengths and missions, especially in 14–16 education (Scottish Executive 2005). Partnership delivery is a key theme of Curriculum for Excellence (see below), and local partnerships are responsible for meeting the entitlements of young people under the 16+ Learning Choices programme (also described below). However, institutional collaboration may be threatened by budget cuts; government pressures for increased collaboration are weaker than in Wales.

A unified qualifications framework

The second broad trend is the development of a unified curriculum and qualifications framework covering different sectors, modes and fields of learning. In Wales, the WBQ provides the framework for building individualised programmes consisting of subject-based learning and 'core programme' learning. Subject-based learning can be academic and/or applied, selected from existing qualifications such as GCSEs, A levels, NVQs and BTECs. The compulsory 'core programme' is designed to provide a more rounded experience that prepares a learner for life within family, community, further learning and workplace (WJEC

2009). The WBQ is offered at Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced levels, which correspond to levels 1, 2 and 3 of the National Qualifications Framework and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales. Over 50% of post-16 full-time learners in Wales now follow WBQ courses, with further expansion expected. Success rates have also improved as providers have become more experienced in offering the qualification. Users have given positive feedback. Employers have praised the WBQ as a good bridge between education and the world of work because it provides a mix of subject-based and generic skills. All Welsh universities recognise it for admission purposes and its recognition is growing outside Wales. UCAS has allocated 120 points to the WBQ Advanced Level Core – the equivalent of an A level at grade A.

In Scotland the *Higher Still* reform, introduced in 1999, established a 'unified curriculum and assessment system' for post-16 school and college provision in the form of new National Qualifications (NQs), a 'climbing frame' of units and courses at different levels (Raffe, Howieson and Tinklin 2007). Highers, the main entrance qualification for higher education, represent one level of this framework. New qualifications will replace Standard Grades (the main 14–16 qualifications) in 2013–2014; the climbing frame will then include nearly all compulsory and post-compulsory school qualifications along with most non-advanced college provision. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), formally launched in 2001, brings NQs, occupational SVQs and higher education qualifications into a single framework designed to include all Scottish qualifications. It aims to support access, transfer and progression and to establish a common language of learning to underpin the transparency and coherence of the system. It continues a unifying trend which dates back at least to 1983 (Raffe 2007), but it also reflects a shift in the understanding of a unified system, from one which promotes uniformity to one which coordinates diversity. Except for group awards offered in colleges most qualifications are awarded on a subject-by-subject or course-by-course basis – in contrast with the WBQ in Wales. The OECD Review recommended a baccalaureate-style qualification for 18 year-olds, based on the SCQF, to cover academic and vocational learning in schools, colleges and the workplace. The government rejected this proposal, but in 2009 it introduced 'Scottish Baccalaureates' in sciences and languages. Designed to encourage take-up of these subjects, these are not baccalaureates in the way that most other countries understand the term.

Broadening and modernising the curriculum

The third policy trend is the pursuit of a broader concept of the curriculum. The aims of the Welsh 14–19 Learning Pathways are outlined above. The first Assembly Measure to be brought forward under the 2006 Government of Wales Act, the *Learning and Skills Measure* (NAfW 2009), introduced a duty on local authorities and FE colleges to work together to offer students a defined minimum range of curriculum options, including both academic and vocational options. Implementation was phased over four years, and all local authorities had to have the specified range of curriculum on offer by 2012. The introduction of the Learning and Skills Measure and its associated implementation timeline galvanised local authorities and providers in the development of curricular choice and learner support – and the positive outcome of the early WBQ pilots, and the more recent positive responses to the WBQ by higher education and employers, led to its wide adoption as the vehicle for delivery of the curriculum choice and breadth required in the Measure. At Key Stage 4, all schools met their statutory minimum requirements by September 2010 and 89% of schools were, by early 2011, already meeting or exceeding the full 2012 requirement.

An evaluation by Estyn (2010) concluded that the number and range of general and vocational courses at Key Stage 4 had increased significantly, that the provision of non-formal and informal learning was good or outstanding in many schools and that the increased availability of vocational courses had a positive impact on students' behaviour, attendance and achievement. The 14–19 learning core was especially effectively delivered where the provider was offering it in association with the WBQ. However, Estyn found only a few cases where schools and colleges were working together effectively, and provision of Welsh-medium vocational courses that required specialist facilities was inadequate. The Minister for Education in Wales, Leighton Andrews, has questioned the pursuit of breadth of choice at the expense of quality (TES Cymru 2011), echoing recommendations in the Wolf Report on 14–19 vocational education in England (DfE 2011).

In Scotland several policies since 1999 have promoted a broader concept of the curriculum, one which offers increased choice from a wider range of subjects, which includes interdisciplinary learning and the ethos and life of the school as well as 'subjects', which develops skills as well as knowledge and promotes (wider) achievement alongside attainment, and which is delivered in a wider range of settings (including the workplace) by a wider range of providers. This broader curriculum is reflected, *inter alia*, in: an approach to citizenship education as a cross-curricular theme that should be supported by the school's own democratic practices (LTS 2000); *Determined to Succeed*, a programme of enterprise education launched in 2003; *Skills for Work* courses to develop employability skills through experience in a broad occupational field, first piloted in 2005; and support for school-college partnerships to provide these and other courses. Most of these developments are subsumed within *Curriculum for Excellence* (CFE), the reform of the 3–18 curriculum launched in 2004 (Scottish Government 2004b). CFE aims to develop 'four capacities' of young people – as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors – and to promote cultural change and school- and teacher-led innovation. From 3–15 the curriculum will provide a 'broad general education', whose content is described by 'experiences and outcomes' for eight curriculum areas and three cross-curricular themes. The years from 15–18 will form 'a senior phase which provides opportunities for study for qualifications and other planned opportunities for developing the four capacities' and support for moving into 'positive sustained destinations' (Scottish Government 2008, 13). Schools have considerable latitude in designing the senior phase. The first cohort will enter the senior phase in 2013; as at 2010, most schools were uncertain how they would implement it and were exploring different models. Many schools planned minimal changes to current provision, typically preserving the current break at 16; other schools envisaged a more flexible model with a common timetable for the three senior-phase years and/or more clearly defined progression pathways (Raffe, Howieson, and Hart 2010).

Rejecting compulsion

Policy-makers in both Wales and Scotland have resisted pressures to follow English policy and extend the age of compulsory learning beyond 16. Both countries attempt to retain young people who are at risk of becoming NEET, by making pre-16 learning more engaging and by offering a more attractive range of opportunities beyond 16. In Wales the Learning and Skills Measure described above places the duty on providers to offer a curriculum choice that attracts learners to remain in education beyond 16, rather than, as in England, placing the duty on learners. In 2006–2007 the Scottish government invited Anton Colella, former chief executive of the SQA, to report on a possible raising of the minimum leaving age. Colella's report was expected to recommend a phased extension of compulsory

learning similar to the current English proposals. However, it was overtaken by the 2007 election and the incoming SNP government announced that it would not extend compulsion. Its own 16+ Learning Choices policy entitles all young people to an offer of suitable post-16 learning when they leave compulsory education or any subsequent learning episode during the senior phase (Scottish Government 2010). This entitlement is to be delivered by local partnerships, led by local authorities, through a model designed to ensure that the right learning opportunities, the right support (including information advice and guidance) and the right financial support are available. This model has been piloted in several areas but it remains to be seen how rigorously the entitlement will be interpreted following the policy's national roll-out in December 2010, and how effective partnerships can be in the context of declining resources and competing demands on the capacity of providers.

Conclusion

Our brief analysis provides evidence of all three types of policy divergence described at the beginning of this paper. In each case, however, the story is one of (continuing) policy difference as much as policy divergence; and in each case the extent of divergence has been constrained.

We have found some examples of the first type, divergence in respect of issues of educational philosophy or political principle. Since 1999 Wales and Scotland have adhered to a more traditional model of community-based comprehensive education and have resisted the English trend towards market-led provision and school diversity. They have sought to provide diversity and choice *within* schools, or within local collaborative networks, rather than *between* them. Wales and Scotland have also continued to develop more unified qualifications arrangements which bring academic and vocational qualifications into a single framework, whereas England has increased the number of different qualifications pathways and developed a credit framework for vocational qualifications only. Finally, Wales and Scotland aim to retain 16- to 18 year-olds within the learning system by increasing the range and attractiveness of the courses on offer, whereas England is preparing to extend the period of compulsion. In each case, divergence has resulted from policy changes in England rather than in the devolved administrations, where it reflects continuity with policy directions being followed before parliamentary devolution.

The extent of this type of divergence should not be exaggerated. Seen in international perspective, the systems and their guiding principles (such as a mixed model of delivery, the basic institutional framework and the broad curricular delineations) have much in common. They pursue many of the same objectives and are all strongly influenced by global discourses such as the knowledge economy. Moreover, some of the 'issues of principle' on which there has been divergence are themselves being re-defined. For example, in Wales and (to a lesser extent) Scotland comprehensive education is becoming re-interpreted in terms of institutional partnerships rather than individual schools. The contrast between unified and divided qualifications systems has become blurred as unified systems have come to be understood as ways of coordinating diversity rather than establishing uniform arrangements. And contrasting interpretations of a unified system are being followed in Wales, which is developing a Baccalaureate, and in Scotland where most qualifications continue to be based on single subjects; in this respect England, with its mixture of subject-based qualifications, diplomas and *ex post* baccalaureates, may even represent the middle way.

The second type of divergence, programme divergence, is possibly the most important, especially between England and Wales where many earlier policies had been part of an 'England and Wales' framework. It is reflected in the development of 14–19 Learning

Pathways, the WBQ, the Learning and Skills Measure and the Transformation Framework in Wales, and of programmes such as Curriculum for Excellence, 16+ Learning Choices and associated qualifications developments in Scotland. Even if many (but not all) of their objectives are similar to those of policies being pursued in England, these policy agendas in the devolved administrations have developed largely independently of each other and of the UK government; they have different institutional expressions and policy dynamics, and they are acquiring distinctive Welsh and Scottish flavours. Thus, the clarity of Welsh policy, focused on a distinct 14–19 agenda and reflected in the four programmes listed above, contrasts with the Scottish policy which draws on multiple, and different, policy agendas. However, in Scotland, and to a lesser extent in Wales, programme divergence merely continues a process that was already well established under administrative devolution before 1999. Moreover, to the extent that policy agendas and dynamics have become increasingly separate and distinctive, the effect, as we suggested earlier, is to place Wales and Scotland on a par with nation states elsewhere.

Indeed, the comparison with nation states elsewhere may be apt. In contrast to other quasi-federal or federal systems the UK has few formal mechanisms to promote consistency, coherence or even mutual awareness among those making policy for each of its territories. There is no framing legislation, underlying set of values or institutional arrangement to support effective inter-governmental relations and policy coordination. Relations between governments within the UK on devolved policy areas have tended to be informal, weak, intermittent and dependent on individuals (Jeffery 2007; Trench 2007). The effects are aggravated by the different administrative and governmental structures that have developed in each territory. It is easiest to coordinate policies across territories if each has similar institutions with equivalent functions and responsibilities and similar ways of working, as horizontal links can then be established between them; the different configurations of government and state agencies in the three territories, and the different ways that policy agendas are defined and developed, make it more likely that each territory will continue to go its separate way. The frequent changes of government structures (especially in England) and the rapid turnover of ministers and officials further inhibit good inter-governmental relations when these are so dependent on informal and personal links

Programme divergence is therefore connected with the third type of divergence, in policy styles. The policy styles of Wales and Scotland, while they should not be exaggerated or idealised, contrast with England. They have resulted in greater stability and consistency in the direction of policy. Both countries have avoided the 'busyness' that has characterised policy in England (Lumby and Foskett 2005; Edward et al. 2007; Pring et al. 2009). Neither country resembles England with its 'constantly changing but highly centralised, top-down, command-and-control system of governance that seeks to manage the [education and training] system from Whitehall' (Keep, Payne, and Rees 2010, 90). Providers such as college leaders feel closer to policy-makers than in England where FE has been subject to 'a particularly rabid form of performativity' (James 2011, 107; Coffield et al. 2008). And both countries have preserved a stronger role for local government and have not created a large number of schools directly accountable to central government as in England.

Once again, distinctive policy communities and policy styles preceded parliamentary devolution, and these contrasts partly reflect continuing differences rather than divergence as such. Indeed, the power of these policy communities, especially in Scotland, is partly a legacy of the political vacuum created by administrative devolution (Greer and Jarman 2008; Keating 2009). Parliamentary devolution has not left the influence of these communities unchanged, but it has primarily redistributed power between the UK government and the

devolved administrations. The aspiration that it would also redistribute power within Wales and Scotland is, at best, only partly fulfilled (Paterson 2003; Rees 2011).

In conclusion, by recognising different types of divergence, and by taking account of differences that preceded parliamentary devolution, we arrive at a more qualified view of the impact of this devolution on policy divergence. We find evidence of policy divergence since 1999 but this has not, as is sometimes assumed in debates about devolution, been primarily a result of the devolved administrations following new policy issues on matters of educational or political principle. In the first place, the most important aspects of divergence have been in respect of what we have termed programme divergence and divergence of policy styles: they have been less about policy goals or key principles than about how policy agendas and programmes are constructed around goals and principles which are broadly similar. Second, where there *has* been divergence on key issues this has tended to be the result of policy change in England, not in the devolved administrations. And third, with respect to all three types of divergence many of the differences already existed under administrative devolution.

Note

1. This article was written before the Welsh and Scottish elections of May 2011. In Wales, the Labour Party was one seat short of an overall majority and formed a minority government. Leighton Andrews retained the education and skills portfolio. The Welsh Assembly Government has been re-named the Welsh Government, and DCELLS has become the Department for Education and Skills. The SNP gained an overall majority of seats in the Scottish Parliament and continued in government, with Michael Russell retaining the education portfolio.

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