

Establishing a UK 'Home International' comparative research programme for post-compulsory learning

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Although devolution is leading to **growing divergence in education** policy, the four countries of the UK still **share a substantially common cultural heritage and a similar social context**. For this reason researchers and policy analysts may find that comparative studies of practice in the home nations provide more **illuminating insights than studies which focus on more exotic or distant locations**. This timely piece of research, carried out for LSRC by David Raffe and colleagues at Edinburgh University, provides a **convenient summary of the different policy agendas** in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and suggests a number of themes which would benefit from researchers' attention.



**Establishing a UK 'Home International' comparative
research programme for post-compulsory learning**

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Section 1
Introduction

This report makes recommendations for a programme of ‘home international’ comparative research into post-compulsory learning, comparing the four home countries of the UK. Such a programme would be timely because the political devolution of 1999 has increased the differences between the post-compulsory learning systems of the four countries. A programme of home international comparative research could help policy makers, learners, practitioners and other stakeholders to understand these differences. It could also exploit the potential for policy learning by comparing the different policy approaches followed in the four home countries. We define ‘post-compulsory learning’ to cover further education, school education beyond 16, work-based learning and adult and continuing education, and to include the interfaces with other sectors. We place our study in the context of wider international comparisons.

Section 2
Home international comparisons

Distinctive post-compulsory learning systems in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have developed in three phases: the establishment of national systems with (in varying degrees) distinctive characteristics; the devolution of administrative responsibilities to territorial departments of the UK government before 1999; and the political devolution of 1999. In many areas of post-compulsory learning, the devolved administrations have followed different policies and approaches from England. These differences are a potential resource for policy-relevant research, and comparisons of the current and emerging differences among the home countries may have value both for scientific understanding and for policy learning. This is partly because contextual factors, which often confound other international comparisons, vary less across the home countries. Home international comparisons are not a qualitatively distinct type of research; they can be seen as part of a spectrum of cross-national comparative studies. While a programme of home international research might serve any of the purposes served by other comparative research, it is likely to have two particular strengths. It has more potential to support policy learning, and it may provide information of practical value to policy makers and other stakeholders.

Section 3
Methods

We designed the study in three stages, which correspond to Sections 4, 5 and 6. These respectively reviewed policy issues and developments in each home country, selected the issues that would be most profitable for home international comparative research, and spelt out the context and rationale for each of these issues. Our sources of data were a review of policy documents, policy analyses, commentaries and selected research; 25 interviews with policy makers, members of public agencies, policy analysts, academics and members of international organisations; and less formal communications with contacts across the UK and Europe.

Section 4

Current policy issues in the four home countries

The key policy documents for post-compulsory learning in England include *Success for All*, published in 2002, which introduced a strategy for reforming further education; the Skills Strategy of 2003, the 2003 White Paper on *The Future of Higher Education*, the 2004 Tomlinson Report on 14–19 education, and the DfES' *Five Year Strategy* also published in 2004. Many of the issues covered by these documents have been the subject of more specific policy statements or reports. Our interviewees considered a key issue on the current agenda to be the reform of arrangements for planning, funding, regulation, quality assurance and performance management; this was a condition for the success of other key reforms, among which the reform of 14–19 education was also mentioned as a key issue. Other current issues include the development of apprenticeship and vocational pathways, the development of the FE sector and credit frameworks. Interviewees felt that the current agenda was being driven primarily by economic concerns, and that the wider agenda of public services reform was also influential.

In Northern Ireland important policy documents include the Costello Report (2004), which advocates replacing the current selective system of secondary education with a system based on a Pupil Entitlement Framework, whose delivery will require a substantial increase in institutional collaboration. *FE Means Business*, also published in 2004, introduced a strategy for FE designed to increase its support for economic development. Several documents since 2002 have taken forward the *Essential Skills for Living* strategy for adult literacy and numeracy. Other key documents include the *Entrepreneurship and Education Action Plan* published in 2003, and the 2002 consultation on the Review of Public Administration. When asked about issues on the current agenda, our Northern Ireland interviewees referred to the developments described in these documents. They also mentioned foundation degrees, social cohesion, inclusion, credit, work-based learning and the development of new methodologies such as e-learning. Policy developments were seen to be driven by both economic and social concerns, including the need to support economic development and the deficit in basic skills.

Two key documents have defined the policy framework for Scotland: *A Smart, Successful Scotland* and *Life through Learning: Learning through Life*. Interviewees commented that these respectively represented the twin goals of Scottish strategy: economic competitiveness, and social justice and personal fulfilment. Other documents have taken forward specific parts of this strategy, including the development of enterprise in education, the review of school-college collaboration, the merger of the Further and Higher Education Funding Councils, the review of higher education, the development of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework and the review of the 3–18 curriculum. These policy areas tended to be mentioned by our interviewees as issues on the current agenda. Links between colleges and universities, and between colleges and schools, were frequently mentioned as current issues, as were enterprise in education, adult skills and quality issues. Interviewees felt that Scotland was pursuing a more balanced approach between economic and social agendas than other countries, but they were also concerned that Scotland was under-performing economically. Devolution provided a spur to the strategic development of education and training.

In Wales the *Education and Training Action Plan* of 1999 proposed an agenda for the new Assembly, and the Welsh Assembly Government's own strategy was set out in its 2001 paving document *The Learning Country*. Other important reports and papers covered proposals for 14–19 Pathways, the *Skills and Employment Action Plan*, the review of workplace learning, proposals for the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales and higher education strategy. Interviewees considered that the main issues on the current policy agenda included developing an integrated model of planning and funding, with a 'level playing field' for the different sectors; the development of 14–19 pathways; credit and qualifications reform; workplace learning; basic skills, key skills and essential skills; and bilingualism. Interviewees felt that changes were driven by the dual goals of economic and social inclusion, and in particular by the perceived needs of economic development, meeting skill needs, raising economic activity levels and widening participation. There was a concern to make Welsh policy distinctive and relevant to specific Welsh needs and demands.

Current issues in the Republic of Ireland include the review of senior cycle (upper secondary) education, the development of a National Framework of Qualifications and concerns with equity and access.

Current European developments are framed by the Lisbon Agenda to make Europe the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy, by the associated work programme *Education and Training 2010*, and by the Bologna and Copenhagen processes of harmonisation and cooperation in higher education, and in vocational education and training respectively. Interviewees identified a wide range of issues on the current international policy agenda. These included the Lisbon Agenda and related issues such as globalisation, economic competitiveness, social cohesion and lifelong learning. Other current issues included the quality of learning, new pedagogies, and the implications for teachers; qualifications frameworks; higher education; funding; the relation between public and private agencies; the academic-vocational divide; work-based learning; employer engagement; reducing school drop-out; and evidence-based policy, programme evaluation and performance measurement.

There are many common themes and issues in policy developments across the four home countries. We find little evidence of major policy divergence as perceived by some commentators. There is more evidence of divergence in policies for specific issues, and in the details of policy, than in the overall goals and priorities for post-compulsory learning. There is also divergence in the ways in which similar issues are defined and linked, partly reflecting the varying remits of policy bodies and agencies in each country. For example, the issues on the 14–19 agenda in England and Wales are also important in Northern Ireland and Scotland, but they tend to be defined in different ways and as parts of different sets of agendas. A programme of home international comparisons needs to be able to recognise common issues as well as the different policy agendas of which they are part; it should also examine the governance of post-compulsory learning and the ways in which agendas are shaped.

Section 5

Selecting issues for comparison

Our UK interviewees felt that systematic home international comparative research had had relatively little influence on policy development in recent years. Mutual influence was greatest in policy areas where the four education systems were interdependent or where there were joint policy-making structures. It was asymmetrical, with (for example) England having more influence on the devolved administrations than *vice versa*.

Interviewees made several suggestions for home international comparisons. Some saw the main value of comparisons in terms of policy *borrowing*, others in terms of a broader concept of policy *learning*. Some saw most scope for policy learning from the comparative study of UK-wide policies and developments; others saw most scope from comparisons in areas where the home countries were pursuing different policies.

International interviewees expressed interest in learning from UK developments, but often lacked detailed knowledge about the differences between the four home countries. The search for best practice was a main motive for comparisons with the UK. There was interest in the relationships among the four UK systems which could have lessons for cross-national coordination in Europe and elsewhere.

Our criteria for selecting issues for home international comparison include: that the issue should be on the current policy agenda in more than one home country; that there are significant differences in policy or practice; and that a comparison is likely to provide transferable lessons for policy and practice, within appropriate timescales.

Section 6

Proposed issues for comparative study

We propose six topics for home international comparison.

Approaches to a unified curriculum and qualifications framework for 14–19 year olds

Wales is developing 14–19 pathways, and the Tomlinson report has placed 14–19 learning on the reform agenda in England. In Northern Ireland and Scotland, 14–19 education is not on the explicit agenda but similar issues are raised by the proposed Pupil Entitlement Framework in Northern Ireland and by the 3–18 Curriculum Review and the earlier Higher Still reforms in Scotland. In all four home countries, as well as the Republic of Ireland, current policies and initiatives aim to develop more coherent, inclusive and unified arrangements for the learning of 14–19 year olds. However, they pursue this aim in different ways. A comparison of these different approaches could:

- identify the arrangements which best support coherent provision across the 14–19 phase
- compare different models of a unified curriculum and qualifications framework
- compare the different models of change in current and recent reforms, and draw lessons for future reforms.

Apprenticeship and work-based training for young people

There has been a series of youth training programmes since the early 1980s, when mass schemes for unemployed young people were transformed into national programmes of work-based training. More recently, differences have emerged between training programmes in England, Scotland and Wales (Northern Ireland already had separate provision). England is committed to 'apprenticeships for all' while the three devolved administrations distinguish apprenticeship from other work-based provision; England and Wales propose to integrate work-based training into 14–19 developments, while in Northern Ireland and Scotland they remain separate. Our proposed research programme would learn from these differences in policy and practice in the home countries, and in the Republic of Ireland, which has followed a different strategy. It would also learn from the rapid turnover of programmes since the 1980s: to what extent does this reflect recurrent weaknesses which have affected successive programmes, and a failure of policy learning as repeated reforms have failed to address these weaknesses?

Foundation degrees, HNCs and HNDs

Each home country is developing its provision of short-cycle higher education in order to meet skill needs, widen participation, encourage progression and (in England) increase total participation in higher education. However, the four home countries are pursuing different approaches. Some are introducing new foundation degrees; some are modernising existing HNCs and HNDs. There are differences in the mode, content and organisation of the provision, and in the role of universities, colleges, employers and other stakeholders in its delivery. A home international comparison could study the effectiveness of these different approaches in meeting the objectives of sub-degree provision, and in resolving the tensions between different objectives. It could also learn from the longer history of sub-degree provision in Scotland, which is currently rationalising and standardising its provision at this level, while the other home countries are encouraging diversity.

'Threshold' skills for adults

All home countries are pursuing measures to enhance the literacy, numeracy and other competences which define the minimum skills for effective participation in adult life. However, there are differences in the definition and concept of this 'threshold' skill level, and in its status in policy (for example as an entitlement or a target). There are differences in the specific interventions being pursued and in the way that they are organised and delivered. In each country a wide range of sectors, institutions and agencies are involved and there are questions about the coherence, accountability and effectiveness of the provision. A comparison across the four home countries would help us to understand the different concepts of threshold skills. It would also cast light on the effectiveness of different interventions, and on how to organise effective and coherent provision that involves a variety of sectors and agencies.

Credit frameworks

The development of credit frameworks is an area where mutual influences among the home countries have already been important, even if these influences were not primarily based on systematic research. The four home countries are at different stages in the development of national credit frameworks, with Scotland and Wales the most advanced. Since 2003 all four countries have been committed to develop national credit and qualifications frameworks, and the Republic of Ireland made a similar commitment in 2003 (it was launched in October 2003). The home countries share a common concept of credit and similar principles for the design of a framework. Nevertheless there are differences in the scale, scope and specific objectives of each framework, in the strategies for developing and implementing them and in the organisational structures that have been created. A systematic comparison of these differences could yield lessons, not only for the design of credit frameworks, but also for the strategy for implementing them and for managing change. A home international comparison could also study the articulation of the different frameworks within the UK, which may provide lessons for the coordination of credit systems across Europe and elsewhere.

Employer engagement in planning and funding

All four home countries are in the process of reviewing and reforming arrangements for planning and funding post-compulsory learning. These arrangements vary with respect to their institutional details, their organisation along sectoral and/or age lines, the role of quangos compared with central government, the nature and role of regional and local planning structures, as well as their funding formulae. They all share common aims and concerns, however, including the need to address the chronic weakness and variability of employer engagement in post-compulsory learning. They also all interact with UK-wide structures, in particular the Skills for Business Network of Sector Skills Councils and the Sector Skills Development Agency. This study would find practical lessons for effective employer engagement by reviewing the history of planning and funding structures over the past few decades, and by comparing current arrangements across the home countries. It would also explore the implications for coordinated policy-making when areas of devolved policy responsibility must join up with areas that are reserved to the UK level.

Section 7
Concluding comments

The proposed studies in Section 6 should be seen as examples of a more general argument that home international comparisons are a potential source of policy learning, with lessons for the process as well as the content of change. However, such comparisons need to be based on systematic, rigorous and independent research, capable of challenging the complacency or self-congratulation of some official policy rhetoric.

Section 1**Introduction****1.1
Context**

This is the report of a project that aimed to generate informed options and recommendations for a future programme of UK ‘home international’ comparative research into post-compulsory education. The project was funded jointly by the LSDA Northern Ireland and the LSRC UNEVOC Centre, and supported in kind by the LSDA Wales (Dysg) and Scottish Further Education Unit (SFEU). It was carried out by a team from the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) at the University of Edinburgh.

The project arose out of the LSDA’s commitment to support international comparative research on post-compulsory learning. An example of this commitment was the establishment of the UNESCO-UNEVOC UK Centre by the LSRC and the British Council in 2003. The centre works in close collaboration with the CEDEFOP ReferNet UK Consortium managed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). However, the LSDA, together with its partner organisations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, recognised the need to complement this research with a ‘home international’ programme, which would examine and compare developments in the four ‘home countries’ of the UK.¹

1 A list of acronyms is provided in Appendix 1.

There are long-standing differences in the organisation of post-compulsory learning in the four home countries. However, a series of measures of administrative devolution since 1970, followed by political devolution in 1999, has led to further divergence in these systems and in the policy priorities that drive them.

Policy makers in the devolved administrations, learners, practitioners and other stakeholders who engage with the four systems need to be able to understand these differences; so do members of the international community who interact with UK education and training. Comparative research can provide a systematic understanding of the differences among the four systems and the implications of these differences. It could also exploit the enormous potential for policy learning from comparing the different policy approaches being followed in the four home countries, especially when their goals and objectives are similar.

We were therefore commissioned to make recommendations for a programme of home international comparative research in post-compulsory learning, whose primary aim would be to inform the understanding of policy differences and the development of policy in the four territories.

1.2

Scope of the study

We initially defined 'post-compulsory learning' to correspond to the learning and skills sector as this is defined in England. This includes further education, school education beyond 16, work-based learning and adult and continuing education (but not the work of HE institutions). We included issues at the boundaries of this sector in our remit and at the interfaces with other sectors, such as 14–19 reform, school-college collaboration, FE-HE links and credit frameworks. In later discussions with our steering group we agreed that 'post-14 education' would be a more appropriate frame of reference. However, our interviews and much of our literature review were based on the narrower definition described above.

In early discussions with our steering group we agreed that a future programme of home international comparative research should build on earlier research, and that it should place home international comparisons in a wider international context, with a particular reference to the Republic of Ireland and to developments in the European Union. It was also agreed that the programme should focus on policy, and that this should include policy making, policy implementation and the ways in which these are informed by research.

1.3

Outline of report

In Section 2 we discuss the context, purpose and existing research on home international comparisons. Section 3 describes our methods. Section 4 reviews current policy issues in post-compulsory learning in the four home countries, drawing on a review of key documents and interviews with selected informants. Section 5 describes how we set about selecting a number of policy issues that would form the most appropriate topics for home international comparative research. In Section 6 we discuss the six topics that we have selected, explaining the rationale for studying these issues and the research questions that a study might address. Section 7 offers brief concluding comments.

Section 2**Home international comparisons**

**2.1
Context**

England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales had distinctive education and training systems long before the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies were established in 1999. Many of their main institutions developed autonomously. Scotland's universities and its school system pre-dated the Union of 1707, a separate qualifications system began to develop in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century central institutions and further education colleges followed a distinctive path of development. Ireland similarly developed a national education system before the partition of 1922, although after this date there was some convergence between Northern Ireland and England. The development of education in Wales was more closely tied to that of England, although there were differences associated with language and the rural context of much of the provision, and a separate Welsh examining body has existed since 1896.

Not only do the systems have different origins, the legislative devolution of 1999 was preceded by a much longer process of administrative devolution of responsibilities for education and training to territorially based departments of government. In Scotland this began in 1872 when the Scotch Education Department was created; in Wales it began a century later in 1970 when the Welsh Office first assumed responsibilities for education. In both countries the process accelerated towards the end of the twentieth century when further powers were devolved, including responsibilities for higher education and training in the early 1990s. Most of these responsibilities had already been granted to the Stormont government in Northern Ireland when it was established in 1922.

The political devolution of 1999 thus marks a third phase in the development of distinctive arrangements for education and training in the four home countries of the UK. In the three devolved administrations there has been an increase in consultation and public participation in policy-making. Commentators have observed a tendency for these administrations to pursue different policies from those of England, and this may lead to further divergence in their education and training systems (Raffe 2000, Rees 2002, Reynolds 2002, Finlay 2003, Egan 2004).

**2.2
Purposes**

The starting point of this study is that these differences may be a resource for comparative research and for policy learning. It has been suggested that comparative educational research has regained popularity in recent years (Novoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003), although its traditional basis in the analysis of separate and relatively self-contained nation-states has come under question (Green 2002). Educational researchers and policy makers have become more internationally aware, and have recognised that comparisons with other countries may have considerable value both for scientific understanding and for policy learning. Does the same apply to comparisons among the home countries of the UK?

Most research on education systems incorporates some notion of degrees of difference. Systems can be more or less alike, whether their similarities and differences are represented by dimensions, continua or typologies. A programmatic paper from the *Home Internationals Project*, based in the CES at the University of Edinburgh, argued that intra-UK comparisons 'should not be seen as *sui generis*, as a qualitatively distinct style of research, but rather as part of a spectrum of comparative studies, which embraces varying configurations of system and societal boundaries, varying degrees and types of difference between systems, and varying levels and modes of interaction between systems' (Raffe *et al.* 1999 p.22). It follows that home international comparisons may serve the same purposes as other cross-national comparisons of education and training. These include:

- increasing awareness of one's own system, through identifying alternative forms of provision
- providing benchmarks for assessing the performance of one's own system
- helping to identify cross-national trends and pressures which affect education and training
- explaining system-level aspects or determinants of educational processes
- improving understanding of educational processes by observing them in a wider range of contexts
- informing strategic and theoretical debates about system differences
- promoting policy learning, eg by clarifying policy alternatives, identifying possible effects or implications of policy options and the practical issues in pursuing them
- supporting the cross-national coordination of national policies, institutions and practices
- providing practical information for learners, providers and other stakeholders whose interests cross national borders (Kohn 1987, Phillips 2000, Green 2002).

A programme of home international comparisons could serve any or all of these purposes. However, it should put most emphasis on those purposes where home internationals may have a comparative advantage. To the extent that home international comparisons are different from other comparisons, this is not because of any absolute difference but because they are more likely to possess three features, or to possess them to a greater degree. These features are: the transferability of lessons for policy and practice; the interdependence of the systems studied; and the organisation and context of the research. We discuss these below.

Transferability

It is well established in the policy literature that comparisons to support policy should aim for policy learning rather than policy borrowing. Specific institutions, policies and practices do not transfer well from one country to another. 'Other things' are not 'equal': contextual differences in the education and training systems and their social, economic and cultural environments mean that any given policy will work differently in the country to which it is transplanted. However, such contextual differences are smaller among the four home countries. The education and training systems are more similar, and they share similar economic, social and cultural contexts. While simple policy borrowing may still not be appropriate, the process of policy learning from home international comparisons may be more direct than in the case of other cross-national comparisons.

Interdependence

The four systems of the UK are interdependent (Raffe 2000). Their education and training policies are subject to common fiscal controls, and they must 'join up' with policies in reserved areas such as employment and social services. They work within the parameters of the same welfare settlement (Keating 2002) and there is still a strong 'British system' for policy-making (Rees 2002). Many learners and teachers move between the systems. In the post-compulsory sector particularly, the UK labour market is a powerful force for coherence, if not uniformity, among the four systems. Occupational standards, and many of the arrangements for linking learning with the labour market, are determined at a UK level. Devolution does not substantially reduce this interdependence, and it may even lead to a convergence of the four systems if it results in greater policy learning (Rees 2002). Once again, the difference between home internationals and other comparisons is one of degree. It is not only within the UK that education systems are interdependent. The need for policy co-ordination, for greater transparency and for mutual recognition of system differences is driving policy in the European Union and in other international forums as well as in the UK. As with global systems, the relations between the home countries are asymmetrical: English policy constrains policy in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales more than *vice versa*, and the relationships among the latter three countries are also unequal (Raffe 1998).

Organisation of research

Finally, at a time when educational research is administered primarily on national lines, the organisation and funding of home international comparative research tends to be closer to that of single-country studies within the UK than to many comparative research studies. Whether this makes the research easier to conduct is a matter of debate; home international comparisons can face difficulties, for example in finding comparable data to analyse, just as much as other cross-national research (Croxford and Raffe 2000).

These considerations suggest that, while a programme of home international research might serve all the purposes of comparative research listed above, it is likely to have particular strengths in respect of two sets of purposes; those concerning policy learning and those concerning the practical value of comparative information for stakeholders engaging with the different systems and for policy makers seeking to coordinate their activities.

2.3 Existing research

A new research programme should take account of, and build on, existing research which compares the UK systems. However, it is not easy to define the scope of such research. We can identify several categories of home international comparisons, including the following:

■ Indirect comparisons

Many writers on education and training in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales describe these systems, or the features under discussion, by using England as a reference point. Typically this involves drawing attention to the ways in which the system differs from England, and skating more briefly over the similarities. These comparisons are indirect because England is not the direct subject of study, and frequently the reference point remains implicit.

■ Side-by-side comparisons

Research which is based on a single home country is often disseminated in books or seminars alongside similar research based on the other home countries. Examples include the recent volumes edited by Phillips (2000) and Gearon (2002), a HEFCE-SRHE seminar on higher education in further education in 2002 (HEQ 2003), and working days for the Nuffield 14–19 Review which have contrasted English, Welsh and Scottish experiences. Side-by-side comparisons can be a valuable means to gain a comparative perspective and to develop research agendas.

■ **Linked studies**

Some single-country studies may have a theoretical, conceptual or methodological link with a study in a different country. The Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish extensions of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) include several examples of projects which are conceptually, methodologically or empirically linked with TLRP projects based elsewhere in the UK.

■ **Trans-national studies**

These studies cover more than one home country, but do not have home international comparison as a central purpose. Again the TLRP provides examples; the projects on *Literacies for Learning in Further Education* (Roz Ivanic) and *Learning Lives* (Gert Biesta) cover sites in England and Scotland.

■ **Directly comparative research**

This itself may vary according (eg) to the extent to which data collection is comparable across countries.

Studies in the last of these categories – directly comparative research – have variously aimed to provide the following:

■ **Histories of education systems across the UK**

There have been few studies since Bell and Grant (1977). Jones (2003) covers the period since 1944 but his main focus is England, and the book covers only compulsory education.

■ **Descriptions of systems and current policies**

An example is the series of reports being prepared by the UK ReferNet, as part of the CEDEFOP ReferNet project to provide comparable information on vocational education and training across the European Union (Leney *et al.* 2003a, 2003b). An OU text by Mackinnon *et al.* (1999) documents the UK systems and the main legislation in each country. ESCalate (the Education Subject Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network) has established the TEAK project (Tackling Educational Complexity Across the United Kingdom) to assist schools, faculties and departments of education in higher education institutions in the UK to better understand and reflect the diversity in educational policy and practice following devolution.

■ **Comparisons of policy debates and discourses**

For example comparisons of policy debates on unifying academic and vocational learning in post-16 education (Howieson *et al.* 1997), and on social exclusion (Ozga *et al.* 2001).

■ **Comparisons of specific policy areas**

For example such as TECs and LECs (Bennet *et al.* 1994), post-16 qualifications reform (Hodgson *et al.* 2004), learning partnerships (Ramsdem *et al.* 2004), initial teacher education (Brehony 2003).

■ **More broadly-based comparisons**

These include Schuller and Field's (1999) exploration of social capital and participation in Northern Ireland and Scotland, the *Home Internationals Project*, which studied 14–19 education in the four home countries, including comparisons of school organisation, post-16 participation, academic drift and parity of esteem, and transitions to work (Croxford and Raffe 2000, Raffe *et al.* 2001a, 2001b, 2001c), and its successor the *Education and Youth Transitions Project* on comparative trends in 14–19 education (www.ces.ed.ac.uk), including analyses of post-16 education, work-based training, access to higher education.

Section 3**Methods**

The project aimed 'to generate informed options and recommendations for a future programme of UK "home international" comparative research for consideration by the project steering group'.

We designed the study in three overlapping stages.

- 1** We first reviewed policy developments in post-compulsory learning, and the issues on the current policy agenda, in each home country.
- 2** In stage two we selected from among these issues and topics those which would be most profitable topics for home international comparative research.
- 3** Stage three involved spelling out the context and rationale for each selected topic, identifying possible research questions and commenting on methodological issues that would arise.

These three stages correspond to Sections 4, 5 and 6 respectively.

Our approach was informed by the rationale outlined in Section 2 above. We focused primarily on current policy issues, although we included the process as well as the content of policy in our sphere of interest. We included an international dimension, by reviewing (albeit briefly) policy agendas in the Republic of Ireland, the European Union and in international organisations, and by seeking an 'international' perspective on developments within the UK and on the potential for home international comparisons.

We collected data in two main ways, by reviewing the literature and by interviewing key informants. The literature review covered the major policy documents of the UK government, of the devolved administrations and of relevant public agencies in the four home countries. We supplemented these by policy analyses, critical commentaries and relevant 'grey literature'. We also, more selectively, reviewed relevant research.

We interviewed 25 key informants, comprising policy makers, policy analysts, academics, members of public agencies and members of international organisations. Our sample was an opportunity sample; members were not randomly selected. They included people we knew personally, people who had been recommended by members of the steering group and people recommended by earlier interviewees. Several of those we approached declined to be interviewed, and some had to cancel interviews having first agreed to them. The interviewees fell into three categories; 'national' interviewees who could comment on developments in one of the home countries, 'cross-national' interviewees who had a perspective covering all the home countries, possibly related to a particular policy area and 'international' interviewees whose perspective related to policy issues outside the UK or their interface with the UK.

Most interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted approximately 30 minutes. They took place in summer 2004. Interviewees had already been sent an e-mail listing the questions to be asked, so they had a chance to reflect on these before the interview. The content of the questions varied across the three categories of interviewees, but all interviewees were asked about:

- the most important issues on the current and future policy agendas of the home countries (or internationally)
- the 'drivers' of current policy developments, and the concerns they were trying to address
- how the policy developments had been influenced by home international comparisons in the past
- the scope for future cross-border comparisons.

Complementing our literature review and the more formal interviews, we collected data through e-mail and phone conversations with informants and colleagues and contacts across the UK and Europe. Our steering group, both in the formal meetings and in frequent contacts between meetings, was an invaluable source of information, advice and contacts. We circulated an earlier draft of Section 4 to our interviewees for comment, and we sent drafts of Section 6 to individuals with expertise on some of the topics covered.

Section 4**Current policy issues in the four home countries**

4.1**Introduction**

In this section we review the current policy agenda of each home country. In each case we start with a brief overview of the administration and governance of post-compulsory learning in the context of current policies for public services reform. We then describe key policy documents on post-compulsory learning published in the past two or three years. We then summarise our interviewees' perceptions of the main issues on the policy agenda and the factors driving change. We conclude with a brief review of issues on the international policy agenda, and an overview of similarities and differences across the UK.

4.2**England****Administration and governance**

The central government department responsible for education and training in England is the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Other departments – such as the Department of Trade and Industry, the Department of Work and Pensions and the Treasury – have related interests, especially in policies to promote skills for economic competitiveness, and there are attempts to improve the coordination of their activities. Several non-departmental public bodies play important roles. These include the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), a regulatory body with responsibilities covering the National Curriculum, assessment and qualifications. Its responsibilities for vocational qualifications also cover Northern Ireland and Wales. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC), with its network of local LSCs, is responsible for funding and planning education and training for over-16 year-olds, including apprenticeships. Higher education is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) is responsible for the inspection of pre-school and school education and care, and for further education provision for 16 to 19 year olds. The inspection of quality of further education provision for those aged 19 and over, and work-based training for all ages in all types of publicly-funded institutions, is the responsibility of the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI). The Skills for Business Network – comprising the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) and a series of Sector Skills Councils (SSC) – was recently established to monitor the supply and demand for skills, to develop occupational standards and to communicate employer needs and demands to learning providers. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) help to develop and implement regional strategies for economic development.

At the local level school education is largely the responsibility of local education authorities (LEAs). England has retained a mixed structure of local government, with unitary authorities in some parts of the country and a two-tier system (with responsibilities divided between district and county councils) elsewhere. Publicly funded schools have a school governing body composed generally of the headteacher and representatives of parents, teachers, non-teaching staff, the LEA and the school's founding body (if any). Further education institutions (including further education colleges, sixth form colleges and tertiary colleges) were removed from LEA control in 1993. They are now governed by a corporation consisting of 10–20 members including the principal and a member from the local LSC. Other members include local business and industry and members elected by staff, students and parents.

The Office of Public Services Reform (OPSR) was established in 2001 to advise the Prime Minister and to work with government departments on the reform of public services. Four principles of reform have been enunciated; accountability within a framework of national standards, devolution and delegation to the front line, flexibility for organisations and their staff, and expanding choice. The OPSR works with government departments and local public services on projects to improve services in priority areas, one of which is education. The OPSR has collaborated with the DfES in looking at the implementation of the *Success for All* initiative in colleges (below), which aims to improve the supply of further education and training provision and to transform key aspects of the infrastructure of delivery.

Key policy documents

Success for All (DfES 2002) outlined a strategy for post-16 education and training, particularly FE. At the heart of the proposals was a move to three-year plan-led funding, within a performance management framework. The strategy envisaged greater specialisation among colleges, with the expansion of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), the establishment of more sixth form colleges and greater choice for 16–19s. This institutional diversity would be coordinated at a local level through Strategic Area Reviews (StARs) led by local LSCs. The document made several proposals to enhance the effectiveness and quality of provision, including changes in the initial training and continuing professional development of college staff and in their professional occupational standards and qualifications.

In 2003 the government launched the national skills strategy *21st Century Skills* (DfES, DTI, HM Treasury and DWP 2003). Its proposals included:

- a skills alliance of the relevant government departments and key stakeholders
- a stronger regional emphasis to planning and funding earning provision, based on partnership. This paralleled the reorganisation of the LSC on regional lines
- completing the UK-wide Skills for Business Network, and encouraging sectors to develop sector skills agreements
- modernising qualifications, building on the ongoing review of vocational qualifications
- the development of a unit-based national system of qualifications and credit
- re-designed adult learning grants
- an entitlement for adults to free tuition, leading to a first full Level 2 qualification
- developing the *Skills for Life* programme for adult basic skills, to include ICT as well as literacy and numeracy
- reforming Modern Apprenticeships, with an emphasis on quality, employer engagement, key skills and lifting the age limit.

The Skills Alliance published its first *Skills Strategy Progress Report* one year later (DfES 2004c).

Several of the changes announced in the skills strategy have been taken further in subsequent announcements and developments. The entitlement to free tuition to Level 2 is being trialled in the north-east and south-east of England. In 2004 the government re-launched apprenticeships, dropping 'Modern' from their title. The 'apprenticeship family' will comprise Young Apprenticeships (for 14–16s), Pre-Apprenticeships (based on former Entry to Employment programmes), Apprenticeships (at Level 2) and Advanced Apprenticeships (at Level 3). There will be trials to develop apprenticeships for adults. *New Thinking for Reform* (QCA 2004a) set out the QCA's 'early thinking' about introducing 'a new, flexible, responsive and coherent framework for recognising qualifications and achievement for adults'. Its proposed unit-based and credit-based framework for achievement would cover only vocational qualifications for adults, but the same approach to credit would be used in the proposed Tomlinson 14–19 reforms (see below) allowing credit transfer between the 14–19 Diplomas and adult qualifications. The QCA launched a stakeholder consultation on *A Framework of Achievement* later in 2004 (QCA 2004b).

In October 2004 the Tomlinson Working Group published its final report on *14–19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform* (DfES 2004d). This proposed a unified curriculum and qualifications framework based on Diplomas at four interlocking levels, from Entry to Advanced. The proposed changes would be evolutionary, and build on existing programmes and qualifications. Each Diploma would include a core comprising functional mathematics, functional literacy and communication, ICT, an extended project, common skills, personal review, planning and guidance and an entitlement to 'wider activities'. The proposals aimed to promote a stronger vocational pathway and would embrace apprenticeships, at least in the long term. The proposals would complement, and to some extent build on, ongoing reforms to 14–16 education, including the relaxation of Key Stage 4 requirements and the extension of vocational options, the encouragement of school-college collaboration, enterprise education and the piloting of Young Apprenticeships. The government is expected to announce its response in a White Paper early in 2005.

The White Paper on *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES 2003a) has implications for the post-compulsory sector as we define it here. The government had already embraced the aim that, by the year 2010, 50% of the population aged between 18 and 30 should have the opportunity to benefit from higher education. The White Paper announced that this aim would be achieved mainly by expanding two-year work-focused foundation degrees, which would become 'the primary work-focused higher education qualification'. It announced government support for the further development of foundation degrees, including a national network, Foundation Degree Forward, to provide leadership, coordination, support and validation. A task force, set up to advise on future strategy, published its report in September 2004 (DfES 2004b).

In *Partnerships for Progression* (HEFCE/LSC 2002) the two main funding bodies for post-16 learning, HEFCE and the LSC, launched a consultation on how to strengthen existing partnerships between HE and FE and schools to raise attainment and aspirations of young people, in order to achieve the 50% target and widen participation.

In July 2004 the DfES published its *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners* (DfES 2004a). This reviewed the department's strategy across the whole range of education and skills. Most of the policies it announced, particularly in the post-compulsory sector, had already been announced in the documents summarised above. The paper provided the strategic context, and it defined five key principles of reform which underpinned its proposals. These were:

- greater personalisation and choice
- opening up services to new and different providers and ways of delivering services
- freedom and independence for frontline head teachers, governors and managers
- staff development
- partnerships with parents, employers, volunteers and voluntary organisations.

The *Public Service Agreements 2005–06* (HM Treasury 2004) set out objectives and performance targets for the DfES. These objectives include:

- all young people to reach age 19 ready for skilled employment or higher education
- tackling the adult skills gap
- raising and widening participation in higher education.

Finally, the Gershon Review of Public Sector Efficiency, *Releasing resources to the front line* (Gershon 2004) outlined departmental efficiency programmes. The agreed target for the DfES would realise total annual efficiency gains of at least £4.3 billion by 2007–2008, with the aim of enabling front-line professionals in schools, colleges and higher education institutions to use their time more productively. The targets were to be achieved by reducing and relocating civil servants, improved procurement arrangements, improvements in policy, funding and regulation, administrative improvements within the department and other public bodies, and improvements in school-level financial management.

Interviewees' perspectives on the current agenda

We asked our interviewees to identify the main items on the policy agenda or on the agenda for the coming three to five years in England. Our interviews were conducted in summer 2004, and reflected the prevailing issues at that time. Despite the large number of policy initiatives and the institutional fragmentation that made it hard to obtain a perspective on the whole sector, our respondents tended to agree on two broad areas; the institutional restructuring of the post-compulsory sector, and the reform of 14–19 education.

The institutional restructuring of the post-compulsory sector referred primarily to the arrangements for planning, funding, regulation, quality assurance and performance management. This included developments in the national and local LSCs and in the Skills for Business Network. It embraced a wide range of related issues, including:

- the balance of top-down and bottom-up approaches, and of demand-led and planning approaches, and the capacity of the system to meet skill needs and performance targets
- regionalisation, collaboration at local and regional levels, and concerns about local responsiveness
- accountability measures, their applicability across a range of providers, and tensions with objectives such as widening participation
- the need for reforms of governance, funding and accountability arrangements if other current reforms, including the 14–19 reforms, were to be effective.

The second priority mentioned by each of the interviewees was 14–19 education and the reform process then being carried forward by the Tomlinson Working Group.

Other issues mentioned by interviewees included:

- the reform of apprenticeships, with issues concerning employer engagement, skill needs and the fit with the 14–19 Diploma
- the development of vocational pathways through the Tomlinson Diploma, apprenticeship and foundation degrees, and the extent to which these different developments ‘joined up’
- further education – in particular the changing roles and missions of FE colleges and the relationship between schools and colleges
- the development of an adult credit framework, and its relationship with a 14–19 framework.

In response to prompts, interviewees also highlighted;

- school-FE links; the challenge of collaboration to deliver 14–19 provision, and the issues that this raised, notably the inequality of pay and conditions for staff in the two sectors
- adult and community learning and the implications of the focus on Level 2; other interviewees were concerned with funding arrangements for adult learning
- the roles and responsibilities of employers in relation to workforce capacity and sector skills agreements.

Other issues, such as guidance and the promotion of Level 3 skills, were seen as important, but to have lower priority in current policy agendas.

Drivers

Interviewees were asked to identify the concerns that the policy developments were trying to address and the factors driving them. The majority of the policy developments were seen to be driven by economic agendas; economic development, competitiveness, productivity and escaping the low wage economy. One interviewee described a prevailing policy rhetoric which perceived no conflict between the economic and social agendas, for example, that increasing employment was the best way to reduce poverty.

A second driver was the public services reform agenda – ‘the new agenda coming from Number 10 and the OPSR’ – which emphasised accountability, standards, devolution to the front line and putting the customer first. This was complemented by the Public Service Agreements with the Treasury, which emphasised objectives, targets, bureaucracy-busting and devolution of responsibilities. It was suggested that despite considerable investment in public services the public were largely unaware of this agenda.

Specific performance targets such as those relating to Level 2 qualifications and the 50% participation in higher education were perceived to have a pervasive influence in driving policy developments. Their effect could be distorting, for example by diverting efforts from learners aiming for other attainment thresholds.

4.3 Northern Ireland

Administration and governance

Under the 1999 devolution arrangements, education and training in Northern Ireland became the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly, with executive responsibilities shared between two departments of the Northern Ireland Executive. (Since October 2002 the Assembly has been suspended and the departments come under the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and other ministers of the Northern Ireland Office, a department of the UK government.) The Department of Education (DENI) is responsible for schools. The five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) are part of the DENI and administer publicly-funded school education at a local level. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is also part of the DENI and it inspects both schools and further education institutions. The Department of Employment and Learning (DELNI) is responsible for further and higher education, training and employment. There are advisory bodies, but no separate funding bodies, for further and higher education. Sector Training Councils have responsibilities for vocational training in certain private-sector areas. The Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) is the main regulatory body for the school curriculum and for qualifications; unlike the QCA it is an awarding body. However, the QCA is responsible for regulating NVQs in Northern Ireland, as in England.

The institutional framework of schools, further education colleges and higher education institutions is broadly similar to that in the other parts of the UK, although Northern Ireland has retained a selective secondary school system and has a different history of work-based provision for young people.

A review of public administration in Northern Ireland is in progress (RPA 2003). The delivery of public services (it is argued) is inhibited by the complexity of the current arrangements, their disproportionate bureaucracy and cost, and their lack of clear lines of accountability. It is suggested that an effective public administration system could also contribute to fairness and the protection of human rights, promote equality and support those with particular needs. The review outlined five possible models of public administration:

- 1** the status quo
- 2** direct delivery of public services by government departments
- 3** delivery of public services by regional or sub-regional public bodies
- 4** a reformed status quo, where the main features of the current system would be kept but local government would be given new responsibilities
- 5** strong local government; major services would be the responsibility of a smaller number of new councils.

Responses from the education sector revealed support for models 3 and 4 with a reduced number of councils, and strong support for the ELB model (particularly given the high proportion of local councillors on the boards) and its application to the delivery of other public services. Respondents argued that the focus should be on quality of service, a child-centred approach, and the alignment of boundaries of educational bodies with those of other service providers. Collaboration between community, voluntary and private sectors should be encouraged.

Key policy documents

Lifelong learning – a new learning culture for all (DELNI 1999) presented a strategic overview of adult and lifelong learning. It aimed to increase adult participation in vocational education and training, as well as access to further and higher education, and to develop basic and key skills. The issues covered included access to adult basic education, the quality of provision, work-based training provision and issues of qualification to NVQ Level 2, partnership between FE, business and the community, funding, the New Deal, Individual Learning Accounts, and the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (NICATS).

Two major reports have made proposals for the future structure of secondary education in Northern Ireland. The Burns Report *Education for the 21st Century* (PPRB 2001) proposed that the Transfer Tests which controlled allocation to grammar and secondary schools should be abolished. Allocation would be based on parental choice guided by a pupil profile, and institutions would form consortia or 'collegiates' to provide a wider range of curricular options. The basis for current policy is the Costello Report on *Future Post-Primary Arrangements in Northern Ireland* (DENI 2004a). This made more detailed proposals based on the principles of equality, quality, relevance, access, choice, respect and partnership. It confirmed that Transfer Tests should end (this is to happen no later than 2008) but abandoned Burns' plans for collegiates, introducing instead the concept of a Pupil Entitlement Framework. This would increase the choices available to young people and provide access to a guaranteed minimum number and range of courses at Key Stage 4 and post-16 levels. At least one third of the courses offered would be of a vocational or applied nature. The implication is that a substantial increase in collaboration among schools and between schools and colleges would be needed to deliver the entitlement.

Further Education Means Business (DELNI 2004) reviewed the FE sector in Northern Ireland. The review was instigated following a report on education and training for industry, and its main thrust was that the prime role of FE should be to support economic development. It covered a number of themes, including special education needs, adult essential skills, key skills, ICT, monitoring and evaluation as well as an evaluation of FE funding. It proposed new strategic partnerships with other 14–19 providers, with the voluntary and community sectors and with higher education.

The Entrepreneurship and Education Action Plan (DENI 2003) was prepared jointly by DENI, DELNI and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. It emphasised the importance of strengthening the links with the local economy across all education sectors – schools, colleges and universities – and of developing entrepreneurial skills and attributes for a prosperous economy. It proposed the wider recognition of all vocational and work-related programmes (including careers information and services) in the 14–16, 16–19, FE and training sectors of post-compulsory learning as well as expanding HE-business links.

Essential Skills for Living: Equipped for the future (DELNI 2002a) outlined the Executive's strategy for adult literacy and numeracy, which it defined as 'essential skills'. The strategy aimed to reverse the situation revealed by the International Adult Literacy Survey, which found that 24% of 16–65 year olds in Northern Ireland performed at the lowest level of literacy, Level 1. Phase 1 of the strategy would involve building a framework of standards, a curriculum, appropriate assessment and accreditation procedures and a more professionalised tutor framework base. Phase 2 would build capacity and engage learners.

The Essential Skills for Living Strategy and Action Plan (DELNI 2002b) further outlined the importance of building capacity and funding through effective partnerships and a diverse range of providers. The report recommended that the FE sector should work more closely with the voluntary and community sector, employers and training organisations. It also addressed a concern with the FE funding formula, and inadequate targets for essential skills.

Interviewees' perspectives on the current agenda

As in England, interviewees in Northern Ireland were asked to identify the main items on the current policy agenda or on the agenda for the coming 3–5 years. Our respondents identified several areas:

- developing new methodologies such as e-learning to deliver post-compulsory learning
- developing essential skills, basic skills and key skills for young people, adults and employers, meeting skill needs
- the Review of FE, and a range of issues concerning the planning, funding and overall management of the system and its relation to economic development and workforce planning
- the Post-Primary Review, 14–19 curriculum and assessment, and the need for schools to develop collaboration with colleges and other partners
- foundation degrees
- social cohesion and inclusion.

Issues which were prompted include:

- qualifications frameworks and credits, including NICATS; the issues included experiential learning and new ways of offering credits, the transferability of credit within the UK and beyond, the effects on widening participation
- work-based learning; funding, accreditation and skills issues.

Other issues which were mentioned by just one individual include:

- guidance
- the viability of schools and the declining numbers entering the post primary sector.

Drivers

According to the interviewees, the policy developments addressed concerns that were simultaneously economic and social. Policy developments in the post-compulsory sector were addressing economic needs in terms of skill shortages in certain sectors, the demands of workforce planning, enhancing prospects for employment and responding to changing economic demands. There was also a concern with raising basic skill levels to those of other countries. These developments were also driven by the need to address social cohesion and inclusion. Policy was also concerned with wider issues of adaptability and transferability, with a view to providing opportunities for young people from Northern Ireland within the UK and beyond.

4.4 Scotland

Administration and governance

The Scottish Parliament and Executive were established in 1999 with legislative and executive responsibility for a wide range of devolved matters, including education and training. These fall under two main departments of the Executive; the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED), responsible for school education, and the Scottish Executive Enterprise Transport and Lifelong Learning Department (ETLLD), whose responsibilities include further and higher education and training. Some areas of adult education fall under the Scottish Executive Development Department (SEDD) through its agency, Communities Scotland. Among the main non-departmental public bodies, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is the awarding body for most school and college qualifications. It also has an accrediting role in respect of Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs), analogous to QCA's role in respect of NVQs. Many SVQs are based on the same occupational standards as NVQs; the Skills for Business Network has a UK-wide role in developing occupational standards. There is no statutory national curriculum in Scotland. Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) provides advice and support on school curricular issues, and the Scottish Further Education Unit plays a supporting role in respect of the college sector. Further and higher education are funded by the Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) respectively. These two bodies share a secretariat and are in the process of being merged. Public funding for most vocational training is administered by the Scottish Enterprise Network and by Highlands and Islands Enterprise. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) has the role of inspection, review and reporting across educational sectors.

At local level, the provision of publicly-funded school education is the responsibility of the 32 unitary local authorities. As in England, most Scottish FE colleges transferred from local authority control and became incorporated bodies, with central funding, in 1993.

Key policy documents

Following the 2003 election the coalition which had governed Scotland since 1999 continued in office. Its Partnership Document (Scottish Executive 2003a) provides the broader policy framework. With respect to post-compulsory learning, the policy framework is defined by two main documents; *Smart, Successful Scotland* (Scottish Executive 2001) and *Life through Learning: Learning through Life* (Scottish Executive, February 2003b). Several interviewees commented that these two documents represented the current balance in Scottish policy that pursued the twin goals of economic competitiveness (represented by *A Smart, Successful Scotland*) and social justice and personal fulfilment (represented by *Life through Learning*). This emphasis also reflected the review of *Lifelong Learning* of the Scottish Parliament Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee (2002), which proposed a more coherent approach to the different sectors of lifelong learning to support four main objectives; economic development, social justice, citizenship and quality.

Smart, Successful Scotland set the strategic framework for the enterprise networks led by Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. It stressed the importance of employability (*inter alia*, as a means to reduce unemployment) and the central contribution of skills and learning to a high wage economy. It proposed a 'renewed priority for skills and learning'; its priorities included enhanced guidance and information, skills for young people, reducing unemployment through promoting employability and promoting entrepreneurial and lifelong learning culture. A recent statement by the Scottish Executive has announced the 'refreshing' of the strategy.

Life through Learning reviewed current measures and future plans in a range of areas, some of which have been the subjects of more specific documents. These include *Determined to Succeed* (Scottish Executive 2002b, 2003f), which presented proposals to expand enterprise education in schools, drawing among other things on the resources of FE colleges. A review of collaboration between schools and colleges was launched by a consultation document, *Building the Foundations of a Lifelong Learning Society*, followed by an interim report later in the year (Scottish Executive 2004b, 2004g). This listed a variety of purposes of collaboration and proposed that all secondary schools should have partnership arrangements with at least one college with respect to 14-plus pupils, and that all colleges should be involved. The Scottish Executive has pursued the merger of the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Councils through a Consultation Paper *A Changing Landscape for Tertiary Education and Research in Scotland* (Scottish Executive 2004d) and a subsequent bill to the Parliament. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) was formally launched in 2001, and developments have been marked by a continuing series of documents. The Scottish Executive has also published a series of documents on its *Higher Education Review* (Scottish Executive 2003c, 2004c). While the review's main focus is on the university sector, it has implications for colleges, particularly FE-HE links.

Two key documents on school education have implications for post-compulsory learning. *Educating for Excellence: Choice and Opportunity* (Scottish Executive 2003g) presented the Executive's response to the 'national debate' on school education, and included proposals to extend choice, and especially vocational options, at 14–16. *A Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Executive 2004e, 2004f) defined principles for the 3–18 curriculum, encapsulated in four purposes; to enable young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. The Executive's response included proposals for new 14–16 skills-for-work courses, stronger school-college partnerships and a review of qualifications for 14–16s.

In other policy areas the emphasis is on consolidation or implementation of earlier reforms. These include:

- post-16 qualifications, remodelled in a unified framework of National Qualifications since 1999; occupational SVQs and NVQs are under UK-wide review and in Scotland Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) are undergoing a modernisation programme
- careers guidance, delivered through an all-age service, Careers Scotland, introduced in 2002
- Futureskills Scotland, established in 2002 to improve labour market information
- the Beattie Committee Report *Implementing Inclusiveness, Realising Potential* (Scottish Executive 1999a), dealing with the transitions of disadvantaged or vulnerable young people from school into further education, training and employment.

On a broader front, the Social Justice strategy of the Scottish Executive (1999b) set out four goals; the elimination of child poverty, full employment, securing dignity in old age, and building strong inclusive communities.

Interviewees' perspectives on the current agenda

The 'main items on the policy agenda' or on the agenda for the coming three to five years, as identified by our interviewees in summer 2004, were:

- the merger of the FE and HE Funding Councils; the implications for post-16 learning and for the ability of the system to meet skill needs
- the role of sub-degree HE and FE-HE links, particularly with respect to widening participation
- the review of school-college links; issues include the source of funding (local or central government or both) and its distribution
- *Determined to Succeed* and enterprise in education, both pre-16 and post-16
- adult basic skills, although other interviewees felt this was now less of an issue than recently, and that it had moved to the policy implementation stage; some felt that there was a need for a review of adult work-based learning and adult skills while others emphasised the role of community-based adult learning
- quality assurance in Scottish colleges.

Items spontaneously mentioned by just one individual include:

- Modern Apprenticeships
- the review of vocational qualifications and the need for an evaluation
- funding for learners through Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) and Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs)
- meeting skill needs – a wider issue which underlies many of those already mentioned.

When prompted, interviewees generally agreed that the current policy agenda also included cross-cutting issues such as social justice, social inclusion and widening access, as well as gender and ethnic equality.

There was less agreement over the status of three policy issues. The accreditation of prior and experiential learning was described by one respondent as 'high on the agenda' and by another as having waned as a priority issue. Credit frameworks (a closely related issue) were nominated as a priority by one interviewee, but others felt that this issue had now been 'cracked' in Scotland with the ongoing implementation of the SCQF. Finally, there was disagreement over the status of 14–19 education. This was seen as a huge priority by one respondent, and as 'not in the policy discourse' by another. As with so many of the issues discussed here, the problem is largely one of the way in which policy issues are packaged and labelled. Many of the topics mentioned as priority issues are common to the current 14–19 agendas in Wales and England, but in Scotland they are not seen in terms of a 14–19 policy discourse.

Drivers

There is an emphasis in Scotland on linking economic development with 'social' agendas including social justice, social inclusion, citizenship and access. Interviewees suggested that Scotland was aiming for a more balanced approach between these agendas than other countries. There was a concern that Scotland was not doing well enough, especially in comparison with the rest of the UK, with respect to economic growth and particularly the rate of business start-ups. An ageing and declining population was also a source of concern.

It was felt that devolution and the existence of a Scottish Parliament had provided a 'spur' to strategic development of the education and training sector. There had been major strategic reviews across most sectors of education and training since 1999, as well as reviews of local government and public bodies. There was a belief that Scotland was under-performing in terms of effective research and that policy was informing research rather than research informing policy. The basic skills area was an exception: research informed policy rather than the other way around.

4.5 Wales

Administration and governance

Devolved powers were transferred to the National Assembly for Wales in July 1999. At the central government level, the responsibility of the education service lies with the Welsh Assembly Government's Department for Training and Education. Specific responsibilities are carried out by Welsh Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies. These include the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC), which is responsible for regulating the curriculum and all external qualifications except NVQs. Estyn (HM Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales) is responsible for the inspection of a wide range of educational provision, including pre-school, school, further and adult education and work-based training. The National Council for Education and Training Wales, a part of ELWa (Education and Learning Wales), is responsible for funding, planning and promoting all full-time and part-time post-16 education and training (including further education, private and voluntary sector training provision, adult continuing education, sixth forms and work-based learning) with the exception of higher education. ELWa was established in 2001 and it is currently an Assembly-Sponsored Public Body; however, there are plans to merge it with the Welsh Assembly Government in April 2006. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) is responsible for the funding of higher education. HEFCW administers funds to support education, research and associated activities at the 12 higher education institutions, as well as funds for prescribed higher education courses at further education colleges.

Wales has a system of unitary local government. Its 22 local authorities are responsible for the complete range of local authority functions, including the provision and organisation of school education services. As in England and Scotland, FE colleges are incorporated bodies not under local authority control. There are 21 local Community Consortia for Education and Training (CCETs) whose role is to facilitate the appropriate development of post-16 learning provision within their areas.

Reform in post-16 education and training is also linked to public sector change. The Assembly has established a public services project to promote efficiency and effectiveness in public services. The first outcome of the project was the announcement in July 2004 that ELWa, along with certain other public bodies, would be merged into the Welsh Assembly Government. In November it was announced that ACCAC would also be merged into the Assembly. The aim behind ending the *quangos* (as one aspect of a wider public service reform policy) was to:

- secure greater democratic accountability of major public services
- streamline working practices
- simplify and speed up decision-making
- release more resources for front line services through efficiencies in central support services and related areas.

The Welsh Local Government Association (2004) issued a discussion paper which welcomed these changes and consulted its members on how services and other functions could be more efficiently delivered at a regional or sub-regional level. Its discussion paper suggested that new democratic regional or sub-regional structures could be established, accountable to new joint committees of National Assembly and local authority members.

In *Making the Connections* the Welsh Assembly Government (2004d) committed itself to a strategy of improving public services based on economies of scale, cooperation and the coordination and integration of services. This was contrasted with a policy based on competition and the devolution of control to small units.

Key policy documents

In *Wales: A Better Country* the Welsh Assembly Government (2003c) set out its overall vision for change, with priorities including sustainable development, social inclusion and equality of opportunity. The priority outcomes are:

- helping more people into jobs
- improving health
- developing strong and safe communities
- creating better jobs and skills.

Before devolution, the Welsh Office set up an Education and Training Action Group to prepare an agenda for the new assembly. Its *Education and Training Action Plan* (ETAG 1999) proposed a national planning framework and funding system for post-16 education and training which, with modifications by the Assembly, was implemented as ELWa and the local Community Councils for Education and Training (Rees 2004). It also proposed an all-age information, advice and guidance service, to be known as Careers Wales, and it recommended the continued development of a national credit-based qualifications and quality assurance framework.

In *The Learning Country: A Paving Document* the National Assembly of Wales (2001a) set out its goal to be globally competitive by providing one of the best education and lifelong learning systems in the world. This document placed education and training reforms in a wider context of transforming the knowledge and skills base in Wales through collaboration between education providers and statutory and voluntary sectors, and creating local partnerships, in a discourse of '11–25 entitlement'. A number of our interviewees commented on the dual goals of economic and social inclusion, which are outlined in this document. The promotion of lifelong learning in Wales supports three areas: realising sustainability, tackling social disadvantage, promoting equality of opportunity and sustaining an environment that celebrates diversity and bilingualism.

In a series of subsequent documents the Welsh Assembly Government introduced proposals for *Learning Pathways 14–19* and oversaw a public consultation and a process of development which allowed for wide participation (WAG 2002a, 2003a, 2003b, 2004c). The 14–19 Learning Pathways strategy aims to increase participation rates for 16–18 education, training or employment from 88% to at least 95%, to ensure that all students leave school with a qualification, as well as increase the percentage of 16 year olds with Level 2 qualifications. By 2015, 95% of people should be ready for high skilled employment or higher education by the age of 25. The wider aims include raising aspirations and confidence among young people and promoting pathways towards higher education as well as ensuring that all school leavers have the skills necessary for employment. The National Assembly for Wales' (2000) *Extending Entitlement: Supporting Young People in Wales* had proposed local partnerships for planning local 14–19 networks and entitlement.

The *Skills and Employment Action Plan for Wales 2002* (Welsh Assembly Government 2002c) provided a framework for increasing the demand for skilled employment in Wales, as well as improving the supply of skilled people to meet the demand. The framework included policies and programmes of post-compulsory learning. The Welsh Assembly Government published a progress report in 2003 and consulted over a *Skills and Employment Action Plan II* in 2004 (Welsh Assembly Government 2003d, 2004b). The action plan aimed to contribute to delivering the strategic agenda of the Welsh Assembly Government as set out in documents such as *Wales – A Better Country* and *The Learning Country*. It also meshed with the European employment strategy and aimed to make maximum use of European funding to support the proposals.

In 2004 ELWa (2004b) published *Developing the Workforce, Learning In and For the Workplace*, the interim report of a review to consider how public funding and policy could support a skilled workforce. It recommended more employer control over training, greater flexibility in delivery and a major review of vocational programmes such as Modern Apprenticeships. It highlighted the need to work with Sector Skill Councils in the prioritisation of support for skills.

In collaboration with other bodies, ELWa (2003a, 2003b) published *Credit Common Accord – Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales* and *Implementation Plan: Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales* (CQFW) and plans for its implementation.

The Welsh Assembly government's higher education strategy was presented in *Reaching Higher, Higher Education and the Learning Country* (WAG 2002b) which built on an earlier *Policy Review of Higher Education* as well as *The Learning Country* cited above. It put emphasis on widening access and increasing participation in higher education by creating 'networks of excellence' and by promoting HE/FE and other cross-sectoral links, as well as the provision of alternative methodologies of delivering education (such as e-learning).

Six areas of Wales have been chosen to spearhead a major 12-month exercise aimed at transforming how education and training are delivered across the country over the next 20 years and beyond. The six local areas – known as Pathfinders – are intended to pave the way towards a new era of collaboration between schools, colleges and work-based learning providers, designed to give far wider choice and better quality learning opportunities to both teenagers and adults. Over the next year ELWa will lead reviews of the education and training on offer in each area and help local partners to draw up action plans for learning structures to meet the skills challenges of the next two decades. Working with stakeholders on the ground, it will examine issues such as wider choices in rural areas, more high quality vocational as well as academic learning options for teenagers and adults, promoting Welsh medium and bi-lingual learning and minimising wasteful competition in order to get better value for taxpayers.

Finally, the Welsh language and the goal of a bilingual Wales are important parts of the policy context. The Welsh Assembly Government's (2003e) *Iaith Pawb: An Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales* outlined measures to promote the Welsh language, in which education and training played an important part.

Interviewees' perspectives on the current agenda

As with respondents in the other countries, we asked Welsh interviewees to identify the main items on the policy agenda or on the agenda for the coming three to five years in Wales. The following areas were mentioned:

- developing an integrated model of planning and funding, and working towards a 'level playing field' for the different sectors; (related to this) promoting and fostering a spirit of collaboration between providers
- 14–19 education, and related issues such as the Welsh Baccalaureate, key skills and reducing the boundaries between academic and vocational education, the concern being to promote greater flexibility and choice, a better balance between skills, knowledge and experience, opportunities to develop personal and interpersonal skills via practical and non-formal learning, and enhanced guidance and support
- credit and qualifications reform – assigning credit to both formal and informal learning
- workplace learning, currently under review, with employer engagement a key issue
- basic skills, key skills and essential skills
- bilingualism
- broader issues, including, economic (in)activity, entitlement, widening participation, meeting skills needs.

Issues that were identified as being on the agenda, but of lower priority, included:

- FE in HE and FE-HE links
- guidance (which some interviewees perceived to be more developed than in other home countries), Careers Wales.

Drivers

As in other countries, interviewees felt that the dual goals of economic and social inclusion were drivers for post-compulsory education and training. Interviewees all agreed that promoting economic development, meeting skill needs (particularly for the new jobs currently being created), concern over the Barnett Formula, which determines the Scottish share of UK public spending, and economic activity were all drivers of change. Other drivers included the move to establish entitlements for young people and adults and the aim to widen participation and remove barriers to learning in initial post-compulsory learning.

It was suggested that there was a concern to make Welsh policy distinctive and relevant to specific Welsh needs and demands, and to promote Welsh ideological commitments. One interviewee felt that a shift in perspective from the provider to the learner was driving change. Another interviewee felt that 'value for money' was a key concern for policy development. Another felt that policy developments were driven by European funds and expressed concern at the duration of such funding and its impact on evidence-based policy.

4.6

Republic of Ireland

As discussed earlier, there is an interest in including the Republic of Ireland in a programme of 'home international' comparisons. We did not include the Republic in our detailed literature review, but we interviewed one Irish respondent who identified three issues on the current policy agenda:

- the review of senior cycle (upper secondary) education; a consultation paper on *Developing Senior Cycle Education* (NCCA 2002) explored different options for the future structure of the Senior Cycle, with different implications for the relationship between the established (general) and Leaving Certificate and its Vocational and Applied alternatives, as well as the transition year between the Junior and Senior Cycles
- the development of a National Framework of Qualifications (NQAI 2003a, 2003b)
- concerns with equity and access at all levels of education.

4.7

International perspectives

In order to place our study in a wider international context, we conducted a number of interviews to explore current issues in post-compulsory learning in other countries in the European Union and in international organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO. Our interviewees included officials of international organisations, members of British bodies whose remit included international policy exchanges, and researchers. It would have been impossible in the time available to produce a full and balanced overview of policy concerns in international organisations, let alone in all their member countries. The account that follows is inevitably sketchy. Our study did not allow for a review of international policy documents, but we identified a few European documents which have been particularly important for lifelong learning in the UK.

The European Commission's (2001) memorandum on Lifelong Learning outlined proposals for realising a 'European Area of Lifelong Learning', supporting and adding value to national strategies. It proposed a broad definition of lifelong learning, recognising that learning takes place in a broad range of settings, across the whole life span, and with a variety of aims.

The main policy framework is provided by the 'Lisbon Strategy'. In March 2000 the European Council in Lisbon set out a ten-year strategy to make the EU the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge economy, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. To achieve this goal, a radical transformation of education and training systems was required. Over the following two years, the *Education and Training 2010* programme was developed with three main goals, which were to:

- increase the quality and effectiveness of education and training
- facilitate access for all
- open up education and training to the wider world.

Thirteen specific objectives were identified, covering different types and levels of education. Working groups were established to work on these various objectives. The strategy relies upon member states to coordinate their actions through the 'open method of coordination'. This involves identifying clear and agreed priorities, indicators and benchmarks, benchmarking exercises to assess countries' progress towards the agreed objectives, identifying examples of best practice, and peer review (Leney 2004a, 2004b). Benchmarks defined targets for employment and learning by 2010. These included targets for reducing early school-leaving, raising adult participation in learning, reducing gender imbalances and raising attainment levels. In 2003 the European Commission (2003c) published *Education and Training 2010: The Success of the Lisbon Strategy Hinges on Urgent Reforms*. This reviewed progress towards the objectives and concluded that at the current pace of change the EU would not meet its objectives. A report published by CEDEFOP, *Learning for Employment*, also argued that reform needed to be speeded up (Bainbridge *et al.* 2003). It also reviewed labour-market trends and drew attention to other emerging issues, including the mismatch between rising occupational aspirations, stimulated by rising levels of educational attainment, and the low skill levels of many of the new jobs that were being created.

In the Copenhagen Declaration of November 2002, European countries agreed 'to increase voluntary co-operation in vocational education and training in order to promote mutual trust, transparency and recognition of competences and qualifications, and thereby establish a basis for increasing mobility and facilitating access to lifelong learning' (EC 2002, p.2). They identified four priority areas:

- the European dimension
- transparency, information and guidance
- the recognition of competences and qualifications
- quality assurance.

The Copenhagen Process complements the Bologna Process, established some years earlier, which commits countries to work towards harmonisation and cooperation among higher education systems.

When we asked our international interviewees to identify issues high on current policy agendas, some were mentioned by several interviewees:

- Responding to globalisation, developing a competitive knowledge economy and promoting social cohesion. In the European context these issues are reflected in the 'Lisbon Agenda', but they are current issues beyond Europe as well.
- Lifelong learning; the concept of lifelong learning, how to implement it, the role of distance learning and e-learning, and so on. Most interviewees were sceptical about the extent to which policies for lifelong learning had advanced beyond rhetoric and had really changed the structures, practices and cultures of learning.

- Learning, teaching and teachers; the quality of learning, new pedagogies, and the implications for the teaching profession and for the training of teachers and trainers, quality assurance and the institutional structures to support it.
- Evidence-based policy, programme evaluation and performance measurement; one interviewee suggested that in Europe the emphasis in practice was on evidence-based performance comparison, rather than on evidence-based policy. There was an interest in comparing the effectiveness of different policies and programmes, and in methods for assessing the effectiveness and accountability of institutions.
- Qualifications frameworks; how effective and adequate were they within their own spheres, how did they transfer between sectors and regions? Interviewees mentioned related issues such as the accreditation of prior learning.
- Higher education; its relation to global markets, its role as a public good, and the differences between university and non-university tertiary institutions in terms of status, funding, institutional specialisation, quality and delivery mechanisms.
- Funding; the level of funding and the mechanisms for distributing it. One interviewee commented that the discourse at the European level tended to be about the re-location of funds rather than new funds.
- The relation between public and private agencies in the delivery of post-compulsory learning.
- Breaking down the academic-vocational divide.
- Work-based learning; how to assess it, and how to broaden its content.
- Employer engagement, including engagement in curriculum reform.
- Reducing school drop-out.
- The European Social Fund.

4.8 Discussion

Several commentators on education and training policy have perceived a divergence of policy discourses across the nations of the UK, particularly since the political devolution of 1999. Scotland and Wales, it is argued, have broader policy goals, which give as much emphasis to social inclusion, social justice, citizenship and personal development as to economic concerns. The policy discourse in England (and possibly Northern Ireland), it is argued, is more focused on economic goals (Stacz and Wright 2004, Goodison Group 2003). Scotland and Wales are also perceived to place less emphasis on markets, competition and quantitative targets and more emphasis on social partnership, on integrated policy approaches and on structural rather than individual remedies for exclusion (Ozga 1999, Leney and Coles 2001, Keating 2002).

Some of our interviewees expressed similar views, although we did not specifically ask them whether the home countries' policy agendas were diverging or converging. Others, however, emphasised the continued similarity of these policy agendas. This reflected another strand in the literature which draws attention to factors which limit any policy divergence (Raffe 1998, Paterson 2000, Rees 2002, 2004). The restricted policy-making capacity of the devolved administrations, the need to 'join up' with reserved policy areas such as social security and employment and the shared dependence on UK-wide structures and institutions such as the labour market, all provide a brake on substantial divergence. There are limits to the formal powers of the devolved administrations, notably of the Welsh Assembly government, which still depends on Westminster for primary legislation. The devolution settlement is asymmetrical – there is no English counterpart of the devolved administrations – and the 'English' government departments sometimes speak for the whole of the UK. The four administrations share a unified civil service with the same culture of government, and they tend to use similar policy instruments. Stacz and Wright (2004, p.14) note that all four home countries use 'inducement-type' policy instruments in order to pursue a shared policy aim, namely a 'broad policy trajectory towards a demand-led system which is responsive to need'.

Policy documents should not be over-interpreted. They may support a range of possible interpretations, and they may be a poor reflection of the underlying intentions of policy as well as its actual impact. The documents we have reviewed provide ample evidence that different policies are being pursued across the four home countries. However, they provide much less conclusive evidence of the scale or nature of these differences. The evidence for a major divergence in policy directions and priorities is, at best, inconclusive. In all four home countries policy documents refer to social as well as economic goals of learning. There are differences in the ways that these goals are connected in the policy discourses of each country, but these differences are more subtle than the construction that is sometimes placed on them, that policy goals and priorities are diverging sharply across the UK. There is more evidence of divergence in the details of policy, and in policies for specific policy areas, than in the overall goals and strategy for post-compulsory learning. We discuss some of these specific areas in Section 6.

There is also divergence in the ways in which similar issues are defined and addressed in each country. A good example is 14–19 education. Many of the issues that are raised – curriculum flexibility at 14–16, the place of core skills and knowledge, school-college collaboration, models of unified curricula and qualifications, the development of vocational pathways and links with the labour market – are similar in the four countries, but only in England and Wales are these issues grouped under the ‘14–19’ label. In Northern Ireland and Scotland such issues tend to be addressed as part of different agendas, and bracketed with other policy concerns. Another example is further education, whose planning and funding are linked with higher education in Scotland and with post-16 school and training provision in England and Wales. Over time, these differences in the ways that shared policy concerns are addressed – and further differences in the sequence in which they are addressed – may create a different momentum of change in each home country, and have substantive implications for the organisation of learning systems and for future policy directions. One implication is that the governance of post-compulsory learning systems is itself an important subject for home international comparison. There is, for example, an interesting comparison between Northern Ireland, where a large number of public bodies are involved in the administration of education and training, and Wales, where current policies aim to reduce the number of quangos dramatically. Another implication is that home international comparisons need to identify issues that are common to the four home countries, even when these appear as part of seemingly different policy agendas.

Section 5

Selecting issues for comparison

5.1 Introduction

In the previous section we outlined current issues in post-compulsory learning in the four home countries and internationally. In this section we discuss the selection of topics for home international comparison. We first report on our interviewees' comments on the influence of such comparisons on policy development in recent years, before presenting their suggestions for topics for future comparison. We then report briefly on the perceptions of international respondents. Finally, we outline our criteria for selecting topics for comparison and list the six chosen policy areas. These are discussed in more detail in Section 6.

5.2 The current influence of home international comparisons

In the telephone interviews, interviewees were asked about policy areas that had been most influenced by cross-border comparisons. Most of the individuals we interviewed in the UK considered that, with a few exceptions, there had been relatively little influence of home international comparisons on policy development in recent years. This was linked with devolution, and the devolved administrations' desire to develop policies that reflected the priorities, needs and demands of each country. Some home countries looked to international policy developments rather than to the other countries of the UK. This was particularly true of policy-making in England. However, some exceptions were mentioned. The interest in an English credit framework had been kept alive by the progress towards national credit frameworks elsewhere in the UK, and the LSC framework drew on the reforms that were already being introduced in Wales.

Table 1
Issues where cross-border comparisons had been influential in the past (interviewees' suggestions)

England	Curriculum and qualifications Credits Accountability frameworks in terms of providers and agencies Planning and priorities 14–19 reforms Unitisation and concepts of flexibility
N Ireland	Essential skills Foundation degrees Centres of Vocational Excellence
Scotland	FE-HE links Entitlement issues Modern Apprenticeships and Sector Skills Councils DWP and JobCentre Plus programmes Educational Maintenance Allowances ILA Merger of funding councils Union Learning Funds Adult work-based learning Adult basic skills
Wales	Sector Skills Councils Credit and qualifications Planning and funding of learning Funding HE

For the most part, however, where our interviewees did perceive mutual influence, this was either in policy areas where the four education systems were interdependent, so that policies in one system needed to take account of policies in the others, or in areas where there were common frameworks or joint policy-making structures which straddled the different systems. This is true of many of the areas listed in Table 1. Very rarely was systematic research into cross-border differences seen to have directly influenced policy.

In this context, it is not surprising that England was perceived to have had more influence on the other countries than *vice versa*. Scotland was generally perceived to be the next most important source of influence. It was also the devolved administration with the greatest capacity and propensity to 'do its own thing'. Some interviewees suggested that policy makers within Scotland had been more inclined to look for policy lessons from Wales since devolution. Policy makers in Wales were more likely to pursue a separate course than before devolution, but they were also aware of the extent of their continued dependence on English developments. There was a sense that Northern Ireland had a history of accepting and following English policy, and that it had sometimes been a testing ground for England. However, interviewees pointed out that Northern Ireland had been influenced by economic development in the Republic of Ireland, and there was a need to look beyond England to the Republic as well as to the other home countries of the UK.

5.3

Interviewees' suggestions

We asked interviewees to suggest areas where there was most scope for future home international comparisons to inform further policy development. We summarise their suggestions in Table 2. We did not ask them to spell out their criteria for selecting these issues, but these may be inferred from the answers they gave. A number of respondents – especially those in policy-making rather than research roles – appeared to see the main value of comparisons in terms of *policy borrowing*. That is, they hoped that comparisons across the internal borders of the UK would reveal examples of good practice or effective policy which could be transferred from one home country to another. Other respondents – especially those in academic roles – appeared to select issues which might support other aspects of *policy learning*, such as increasing understanding of one's own system, clarifying policy options and identifying common trends and pressures. There was a further contrast between respondents who saw most scope for policy learning from the comparative study of UK-wide policies and developments, such as NVQs/SVQs and the Skills for Business Network, and those who saw most scope for comparisons in areas where the home countries were pursuing different policies.

Table 2
Interviewees'
suggested topics for
future cross-border
research

England	Accountability Guidance Credit Institutional arrangements
N Ireland	Qualification and credit frameworks Development of tertiary sector Funding of HE Funding of FE Sector Skills Councils Essential skills Foundation degrees FE-industry links
Scotland	NEET young people (not in education, employment or training) Basic skill initiatives HE-FE links Modern Apprenticeships Widening access School-college links Qualification and credit frameworks Employability Welfare to Work Welfare issues Sector Skills and adult work-based learning
Wales	Work-based learning Widening access Frameworks for accreditation and qualification Community learning 14–19 education Informal learning Basic skills Collaboration of learning providers Planning Funding Quality assurance

5.4 International perspectives

We asked our ‘international’ interviewees about the extent of foreign interest in current policy and practice in the UK and in the differences among the four UK systems. We also asked them to suggest which policy issues could benefit most from comparisons with the UK and with (and among) the four home countries.

While we should be cautious in generalising from the small number of responses, they suggest a widespread interest in learning from UK developments, but a frequent lack of knowledge, or confusion, about the differences between the four home countries. England is the best known country, and most of the discourse and the policy contacts centre on England. Our interviewees suggested that foreign policy makers were more likely to express an interest in Scotland than in Wales or Northern Ireland. The Scottish system was perceived to be simpler and easier to understand than the English system, and it had been proactive in developing relations with particular countries. Wales was also relatively well connected, especially with European networks. One interviewee commented that Northern Ireland tended to be left behind in such comparisons. Our Irish respondent noted that there were relatively few systematic comparisons between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Most interviewees agreed that the search for 'best practice' was a main motivation for comparisons with the UK, but several pointed out that this best practice needed to be placed in its structural context and there was an interest in learning from the ways in which policies and programmes were organised and managed. There was no consensus on whether and when the UK offered 'best practice'. One interviewee considered that the UK was advanced both in the practice of lifelong learning and in the related research, another felt that the UK was lagging behind. It is therefore not surprising that respondents tended to suggest different policy areas when asked to name those which could benefit from comparisons with and within the UK. Their answers included:

- lifelong learning and how it is monitored and reviewed
- how to achieve coherence in an institutionally differentiated system (for example, with respect to funding)
- qualifications frameworks, assessment and accreditation
- 14–19 curriculum and qualifications reform
- equality and inclusion
- non-formal and informal learning
- literacy.

Some interviewees commented that there could be international interest in the relationships among the four UK systems. For example, there was interest in how the different qualifications systems of the UK cohered, and in the implications for mobility and co-operation. This might have lessons for the development of more coordinated arrangements across Europe. Other interviewees commented that the relationships among the UK systems resembled federal countries such as Germany, and that home international comparisons were relevant to a wider interest in decentralisation and devolution and in more complex systems of governance.

5.5

Proposed topics

In making our own judgements we have used the following criteria for selecting issues for 'home international' comparison:

- 1** The issue is on the current policy agenda – or is likely to be on the agenda in the next three to five years – in more than one home country.
- 2** There are significant differences in policy or practice between the home countries. (These should be national-level differences, or at least pilots for national reforms; initiatives that are merely local could be studied within one system.)
- 3** A comparison is likely to provide transferable lessons for policy and practice. ('Transferable lessons' does not refer only to transferable policies or practices, it refers to the wider concept of policy learning described above.)
- 4** The timescale for research is compatible with the timescale for applying any lessons or conclusions from the research.
- 5** The topic is researchable.
- 6** The research might complement, but does not duplicate, other home or 'away' international research.

On the basis of these criteria, and the evidence reviewed in Sections 1–5 of this report, we propose the following six topics:

- 1** approaches to a unified curriculum and qualification framework for 14–19 year olds
- 2** apprenticeship and work-based training for young people
- 3** foundation degrees, HNCs and HNDs
- 4** credit frameworks
- 5** 'threshold' skills for adults
- 6** employer engagement in planning and funding.

We discuss these, and explain the reasons for our choices, in Section 6.

Section 6**Proposed issues for comparative study****6.1
Introduction**

In Section 5 we proposed six topics for home international comparisons. In this section we say more about these topics, indicate possible research questions and say why they are promising topics for comparative research among the home countries of the UK. They are not, of course, the only possible topics for such research. This section may also be read as exemplifying the more general argument for home international comparative research that we make throughout this report.

**6.2
Approaches to a unified curriculum and qualifications framework for 14–19 year-olds****Context**

Reforms of 14–19 education are under way or anticipated in all parts of the United Kingdom. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Curriculum 2000 changed the structure of advanced courses, adding an intermediate (AS) tier as a stepping stone to A-level and AVCE (Hodgson and Spours 2003). In England, the Tomlinson Working Group proposed a unified structure of 14–19 diplomas at four levels, to be implemented over a ten-year timescale (DfES 2004d). The diplomas would build upon existing courses and qualifications and draw on current initiatives such as the Increased Flexibility Programme and the 14–19 Pathfinders, which encourage school-college collaboration in the delivery of programmes. The government responded in a White Paper early in 2005.²

In Wales, all young people will be on ‘14–19 learning pathways’ by September 2007 (WAG 2003b, 2004c). The pathways will be developed by local networks to meet local needs and circumstances, subject to national criteria. Each pathway is intended to meet the individual needs of the learner, and will offer a choice of content and mode of learning, but it will also include a common core, as well as support from a learning coach, access to personal support and careers advice and guidance. The pathways initiative is ‘strongly influenced by new approaches to learning pedagogy’, as well as by principles of entitlement and inclusion (Egan 2004, p.11). The pathways will incorporate the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification, which is currently being piloted at Advanced and Intermediate level, with a Foundation award to be added.

In Northern Ireland the last transfer tests for entry to selective post-primary education will be held in 2008. Thereafter an Entitlement Framework will guarantee each young person access to a range of curricular options at Key Stages 3 and 4 and post-16. It is expected that schools and colleges will collaborate to deliver this entitlement, which will include a minimum of one-third vocational and one-third academic options (DENI 2004a, 2004b).

2 Full white paper at www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/14-19educationandskills/pdfs/14-19whitepaper.pdf

In Scotland, the Higher Still reforms introduced a 'unified curriculum and assessment system' of new National Qualifications for post-16 education. Phased in from 1999, this system is substantially in place, although some elements, including group awards and core skills, are currently under review. With respect to the 14–16 curriculum, the Scottish Executive (2004e, 2004f) is committed to relaxing age and stage restrictions, providing more vocational options, developing new Skills for Work courses, expanding enterprise education and increasing school/college partnerships. The Executive will decide on the future of 14–16 qualifications by 2007. If it decides to replace Standard Grade by new National Qualifications, the effect would be to establish a single curriculum and qualifications framework from 14-plus. New National Qualifications are already being used instead of Standard Grades in the 14–16 curriculum, but so far mainly on a piecemeal basis.

These developments are the latest in a sequence of 'unifying' policy initiatives in post-16 and 14–19 education, which have aimed to develop systems of education and training that are both inclusive and progressive, that encourage individual differentiation within a unified framework. In Scotland this sequence is commonly traced back to the Action Plan which modularised vocational education in the 1980s (SED 1983). The change process in England and Wales has followed a different and rather more circuitous path (Richardson 1993, Spours *et al.* 1990). The changes have involved tensions which have sometimes become public, as in the exam crises of Scotland in 2000 and England in 2001 and 2002, and in disagreements over the design of the Welsh Baccalaureate. In all countries, more recent reforms have attempted to learn the lessons of previous experience and to manage further change in a way that keeps stakeholders on board and allows sufficient time for developments to be prepared and piloted.

In the Republic of Ireland, secondary education leads to two main qualifications; the Junior Certificate, typically taken around 14–15 years, and the Leaving Certificate taken after a further two or three years of study. A large majority of students attempt the Leaving Certificate. During the 1990s, two new 'orientations' were introduced (Tuohy 2003). As alternatives to the established Leaving Certificate, students may take the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), which draws mainly on the same courses as the established Leaving Certificate but with a vocational emphasis and additional modules, or the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) which is organised and delivered separately. A third innovation, the Transition Year, offered an additional year between junior and senior cycles (Smyth, Byrne and Hannan 2004). In 2002 the Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2002, 2003) launched a consultation on the future of the senior cycle, with four options: the status quo, merging the LCVP and the established Leaving Certificate, a three-year senior cycle (incorporating the Transition Year), and a fully unified senior cycle (also incorporating the Leaving Certificate Applied). Alternative models of a progressive and unified curriculum and qualifications framework are thus on the agenda in the Republic of Ireland as well as the UK.

Research questions

- 1** What are the barriers to planning 14–19 education as a coherent phase, and how are these barriers best overcome? Which institutional and organisational structures aid the planning and delivery of 14–19 education as a coherent phase?
- 2** Which visions of the curriculum and qualifications for 14–19 year olds have been pursued over the past five to 10 years in the four home countries and in the Republic of Ireland, and which visions are being developed or pursued now?
- 3** Which models of policy change have been used (or proposed) in order to develop and implement these visions?
- 4** What lessons for future change strategies can be learnt from the comparative experience of these models?

Rationale

In recent years policy makers in England and Wales have focused on 14–19 education as a discrete phase for policy-making, partly in order to overcome perceived barriers at 16, in particular the barriers associated with GCSE and with dropping-out. Nevertheless the age of 16 still represents a break. Compulsion ends at 16, half of those who continue in learning change institution, and the funding and regulatory environments are very different before and after 16. In Scotland 14–19 is not seen as a phase, but some developments – such as the Curriculum Review and the growing take-up of new National Qualifications at 14–16 – point to curriculum frameworks which will increasingly bridge the traditional boundary at 16. In Northern Ireland the Entitlement Framework which is to be offered following the ending of selection at 11 will also straddle the age of 16 (DENI 2004a, 2004b). However, in Northern Ireland and Scotland many institutional structures – including the departments of government – reinforce the separation of school and post-school learning.

The first research question would thus explore the barriers to the unity of the 14–19 phase within each country, and compare the strategies for making it a more coherent phase.

Current 14–19 developments across the UK and the Republic of Ireland include baccalaureates, overarching certificates and 'climbing-frame' models. They involve different styles of assessment and certification, and different approaches to pedagogy and curricular integration. They assume different configurations of institutional (school and college) roles, and they variously include or exclude work-based provision. The second research question would compare these different models for more unified 14–19 systems and the aims and objectives which they are meant to pursue.

The third and fourth research questions attempt to map and learn from the variety of models of educational change that are represented in recent 14–19 reforms across the UK and Ireland. In England the reviews of Curriculum 2000, the inquiry into A-level standards and the approach of the 14–19 Working Group have reflected a desire to learn from the experience of Curriculum 2000 by introducing a more consultative and slowly-paced process of change (Hodgson and Spours 2003). In Scotland the reviews of National Qualifications since 2000 have similarly tried to learn from the earlier experience of the Higher Still change process (Raffe *et al.* 2002). In Wales 14–19 pathways have been the subject of a devolved process of consultation and policy development, involving large numbers of stakeholders at different levels of the system (Egan 2004). The implementation of the pathways will also be devolved. In Northern Ireland the consultations over the Burns and Costello Reports involved a substantially higher level of public participation than in most earlier educational policy-making (McKeown 2003). The research would analyse the different models of educational change and draw more systematic lessons from the comparison. Which approaches to consultation and participation in policy-making achieve the greatest ‘ownership’ of the reforms among those who implement them? There are also more specific lessons that may be drawn for such issues as curriculum design, assessment and the delivery of key skills (Hodgson *et al.* 2004).

Comment on research design and existing research

There is a significant body of existing research on which to build. The Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training, launched in 2003, has begun to address some of the institutional and organisational barriers to coherence and unification in 14–19 provision in England and Wales (www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk). The second research question could build on conceptual frameworks developed in earlier comparisons of post-16 policy developments in the UK. These distinguished, for example, between ‘unified’ and ‘linked’ systems and between ‘grouped’ and ‘open’ qualification structures (Spours *et al.* 2000, Hodgson *et al.* 2004). The third question could build on earlier attempts to analyse, and draw lessons from, recent policy experiences in England and Scotland (Higham *et al.* 2002, Raffe *et al.* 2002, Hodgson and Spours 2003, Lumby and Foskett *in press*). The proposed research would extend these studies by including more recent policy developments and by broadening the comparative dimension, especially to give more attention to developments in Northern Ireland and Wales.

6.3

Apprenticeship and work-based training for young people

Context

The New Training Initiative of 1981 started a series of policy developments that led to the development of occupational standards and the NVQs which certificated them, and the introduction of the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) in 1983. YTS was the first of a series of mass youth training programmes in Great Britain. It replaced the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP), a mass work experience programme introduced in 1978 to deal with rising youth unemployment. There was thus a decision to develop a new work-based route for young people starting from provision for the young unemployed, rather than from the long-established apprenticeship system. This decision reflected the perceived weaknesses of the apprenticeship model, including its emphasis on time-serving rather than the attainment of standards, its concentration in specific (male-oriented, craft-based) occupations and its association with trade union influence and with restrictive practices. It represented a distinctive British approach to vocational education and training; an informal, voluntarist and weakly-regulated model of workplace training, with guaranteed places for all unemployed school leavers. The OECD (1985) saw this 'mixed model' as an alternative to the 'dual' and 'schooling' models in other countries.

The YTS was introduced by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC), a British-wide agency, with the same model for England, Wales and Scotland. The MSC's remit did not cover Northern Ireland, where the Youth Training Programme (YTP) was introduced in 1982, one year ahead of the YTS. The YTP was replaced by the Jobskills programme in 1995. The organisation and objectives of youth training have differed in Northern Ireland, notably in its stronger emphasis on social inclusion. Jobskills covers a wider age range and offers a broader training, including core skills.

The recent history of work-based training for young people is notable for the succession of different programmes. In England alone the sequence includes YOP, one-year YTS, two-year YTS, Youth Training, Training Credits, Youth Credits, Modern Apprenticeships, National Traineeships, and Foundation and Advanced Modern Apprenticeships and Entry to Employment. In 2004 the 'Modern' label was dropped from Apprenticeships and the government announced new Young Apprenticeships for 14–16 year olds. This rapid turnover of programmes partly reflects repeated attempts to deal with chronic weaknesses that persisted from programme to programme. Youth training has not evolved in a simple linear fashion, but there have been some consistent lines of development. These include the move from inputs to outputs as the main basis for specifying, funding and regulating youth training, moves to make it more employer- and employment-related, and since 1994 the attempt to reincorporate the apprenticeship tradition into the new framework. More recently there has been a move to develop new work-based pathways from 14–16 through to foundation degrees.

There has also been a process of devolution and differentiation in Wales and Scotland. At the time of writing, youth training is delivered through Entry to Employment and Foundation and Advanced Apprenticeships in England, National Traineeships and Modern Apprenticeships in Wales, Skillseekers (which incorporate Modern Apprenticeships) in Scotland, and Jobskills (which also incorporate Modern Apprenticeships) in Northern Ireland. These programmes have many similar features but they vary in their organisation, in their arrangements for funding, monitoring and quality assurance, in their approaches to employer engagement and in their criteria for eligibility and selection. England is attempting to offer 'apprenticeships for all', whereas Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales distinguish apprenticeships from other government-supported training. (In Wales this is subject to the outcomes of the current review of workplace learning.) England and Wales are aiming to incorporate apprenticeships into unified 14–19 arrangements, whereas in Scotland and Northern Ireland they remain separate.

Research questions

- 1** What lessons for current policy can be drawn from the history of government supported youth training and apprenticeships in the UK since 1981, and from the changes and continuities over this period?
- 2** What further lessons can be drawn from comparing the different histories in the four home countries, and from recent developments in apprenticeships in the Republic of Ireland?

Rationale

Current work-based training in the UK is criticised for uneven quality, inadequate employer engagement, low status, gender inequalities, low completion rates and wide variation between traditional and non-traditional occupational areas (Ryan and Unwin 2001, Steedman 2001, Fuller and Unwin 2003, Gallacher *et al.* 2004). The criticisms tend to be similar across the home countries. Critics also point to recurring problems in the mechanisms for coordinating and delivering work-based training, the voluntarist principle with respect to employer participation, and the tension between the twin goals of meeting skill needs and of promoting a comprehensive coverage (with guarantees of places) to address problems of social and economic inclusion.

The proposed research would therefore ask two simple questions. The first question asks why the successive programmes described above have apparently failed to address the underlying weaknesses of youth training. The criticisms summarised above have been made almost continuously since the 1980s. This indicates a failure of policy learning which the research would aim to correct. The second question asks what can be learnt from the differences in approach across the UK. For example, do the different methods of organising and funding youth training affect the level of employer engagement? Do Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which distinguish apprenticeships from other youth training programmes, avoid the tension between skill development and social inclusion which commentators have noted in England, where apprenticeship provides the single model for work-based provision? The research may also learn from the apparent success of work-based training in the Republic of Ireland, a country with less of an apprenticeship tradition and an employment structure that has historically been less conducive to work-based training. Ryan (2004) has argued that this success – and that of other European countries – is partly attributable to the role of government in establishing intermediate semi-autonomous institutions whose task it is to promote apprenticeships.

Comment on research design and existing research

The proposed research would be primarily a desk study. There is already an extensive literature on youth training and its development in the UK since the 1980s, and a large number of evaluations and other studies of its development and impact at different points in its history. The main challenge would be to find sufficiently rigorous evidence to answer the second, comparative, research question. Data on participation, attainment and progression from youth training programmes has been remarkably poor, especially since 1990 when national programmes were replaced by more devolved arrangements led by Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) and Local Enterprise Councils (LECs). There has been some recent improvement, and an early task of the project would be to audit the availability and suitability of current data. This could be the main focus of an initial study. The Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education, launched in October 2003, has reviewed data sources in addition to stimulating debate on issues of policy and practice (www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk). The England and Wales Youth Cohort Survey and Scottish School Leavers Surveys provide a relatively consistent source of data over time. In England the DfES's Longitudinal Study of Young People, based on a cohort aged 13/14 in 2004, will be an important future data source. The Labour Force Survey has been used to derive estimates of young people not in education, employment or training, but it may be less suitable for analysing youth training programmes.

6.4

Foundation degrees, HNCs and HNDs

Context

Foundation degrees were launched in England in 2000 as a two-year higher education programme designed to meet skill needs at the higher technician and associate professional level, and to contribute to widening participation. They have been seen as a main vehicle for the expansion of higher education to reach the target of 50% participation by 2010. The first foundation degree pilots began in 2001, and three years later there were more than 800 foundation degrees on offer and more than 24,000 students, nearly half of them part-time (DfES 2004b). Foundation degrees are expected to attract students from the vocational pathways being developed at 14–19, both apprenticeships and full-time programmes. They are also expected to attract students with non-traditional qualifications, older learners, and people wishing to change their occupation. Different models of foundation degrees are being developed in England, but most involve partnerships of FE and HE institutions, and the participation of employers, with a central role for formally assessed work-based learning. 'Promot[ing] collaboration between employers, Regional Development Agencies, Sector Skills Councils, universities, higher and further education colleges' is one of the DfES' objectives in the development of foundation degrees, alongside reducing skill shortages and promoting wider participation (DfES 2003c, p.4). The Foundation Degree Task Force described employer engagement as one of the biggest challenges facing the initiative (DfES 2004c). Commentators have noted that foundation degrees need to be demand-led rather than supply-led if they are to be successful. There are also concerns that the concept of a foundation degree undermines the government's commitment to the Bologna Declaration and the harmonisation of higher education in Europe.

Foundation degrees have been piloted in Northern Ireland, in seven colleges collaborating with the two universities, in ICT, Hospitality and Construction. *Further Education Means Business* (DELNI 2004) stated the government's intention to base the further development of FE provision of higher education around foundation degrees. Higher education provision currently represented 11% of all FE enrolments, mainly for Higher National (HN) qualifications. Foundation degrees would be developed 'as important contributors to work-based learning, rather than a means of expanding provision' (p47). They would, over time, replace HN qualifications. The document hoped that further development would draw on wider experience in Great Britain. However, the presence of only two universities is a constraint, and there is a view among some stakeholders that foundation degrees are an unnecessary addition to existing well-established provision. The interface between FE and HE is still developing in Northern Ireland with significant issues still to be addressed.

The Welsh Assembly Government committed itself to foundation degrees in 2001, 'an early example of policy borrowing under devolved conditions' (Griffiths 2003, p.372). As in Northern Ireland, but unlike in England, foundation degrees were to be developed within existing numbers. No additional places would be funded through them. Moreover, it was expected that many foundation degrees in Wales would be developed by universities, with less insistence than in England on collaboration with FE colleges. This reflected the smaller role of FE colleges in higher education provision in Wales. Foundation degrees appear to be more marginal to current policy in Wales, where student finance and institutional reconfiguration dominate the higher education policy agenda. There is no mention of foundation degrees in *Reaching Higher*, the strategic document for higher education published in 2002 (WAG 2002b). In 2004 the consultation document for the second *Skills and Employment Action Plan* noted that foundation degrees 'have only limited availability in Wales. We need to consider whether such programmes have more to offer, given our needs and circumstances.' This became a question for the consultation, in the context of the broader question of whether to develop new vocational routes or to improve the quality of existing routes (WAG 2004b, pp.23–24).

Scotland has no plans to introduce foundation degrees. HNC and HND qualifications are well regarded in Scotland, and the college sector plays the largest role in higher education provision of all the countries of the UK. More than half of all entrants to higher education in 2001 entered through colleges (Morgan-Klein 2003). Virtually all sub-degree provision is provided by colleges. FE-HE links in Scotland tend to have focused around articulation rather than around franchising or collaborative provision, and the introduction of a foundation degree model along English lines would not easily fit this pattern. The current modernisation of HN qualifications by the Scottish Qualifications Authority is introducing more standardised arrangements for collaboration as well as for the design and content of awards. Nevertheless, many of the issues about collaboration and about the design and delivery of sub-degree provision are as relevant to Scotland as to the other home countries. In particular, commentators have described colleges and HE institutions as 'two parallel systems' of higher education, and collaboration between these systems is a matter of current debate (Gallacher 2002). These debates have become more intense as the process of merging the further and higher education funding councils gathers momentum.

Research questions

- 1** What are the objectives of current and planned sub-degree and foundation degree provision in each home country, for example with respect to increasing participation levels, widening access, promoting progression and meeting skill needs?
- 2** Which models of organising and delivering this provision are being adopted, and what are the roles of HE, FE, employers and other stakeholders in each model? Why do the home countries favour different models?
- 3** What can be learnt from the four home countries' experiences to date about the implications of different models of provision for the achievement of the objectives listed above? How successfully do they manage the tensions between different objectives?
- 4** What policy lessons can the other home countries learn from the earlier cycles of development and reform of HNCs and HNDs in Scotland?

Rationale

In each country, foundation degree or sub-degree provision is expected to serve a similar range of purposes, including economic purposes, such as meeting the demand for intermediate and higher level skills and social purposes such as widening participation. There is some variation among the home countries, notably in England where foundation degrees are seen as a means of meeting the 50% participation target, but by and large the four countries share similar aims for provision at this level.

However, the four countries have different strategies for achieving these aims. England and Northern Ireland are committed to developing new foundation degrees, while Scotland is committed to modernising its existing HN provision. Wales appears to be less committed to either approach and is consulting on the balance between them. Some voices in England and Northern Ireland have advocated strengthening existing provision as an alternative to foundation degrees. England and Northern Ireland are developing a model based on collaboration between FE, HE and employers; the Welsh model appears more oriented to provision by HE institutions, while the Scottish HN continues to be firmly based in the college sector. The role of employers similarly varies, as does the role of other stakeholders. Local LSCs and Regional Development Agencies are important in the English context.

There is also variation *within* each home country in the emerging models of delivery and organisation of provision, as well as in the quality of provision and in its outcomes. Some of our English interviewees questioned whether work-based learning played a central role as consistently as the model of foundation degrees suggested. Variability across programmes and institutions is a theme of the QAA's (2003) *Overview Report* on foundation degree reviews and of other early research described in the Task Group's report (DfES 2004b). However, there is also significant variation at the country level. This variation partly reflects policy and funding decisions taken within each country, but it also reflects national differences in the strength of existing provision, in the experience of colleges in HE-level provision and of HE institutions in sub-degree provision, and in the extent and nature of FE-HE links. Moreover, there are different policy dynamics created by the 50% target for HE participation in England, the fact that Northern Ireland and Scotland have already achieved this level and the decision not to set a target in Wales.

A comparative study of developments within and between the home countries could, therefore, provide valuable insights into the practical and educational issues raised by different models of provision, and in the effectiveness of these models in achieving the objectives of meeting skill needs, widening participation and raising total participation in HE. The study would need to allow for the different goals of provision at this level and for the contextual differences which led to the different models in the first place. Our first two research questions would, therefore, explore the purposes of provision in each country and the reasons for selecting the chosen models. With respect to the third research question, in addition to studying the impact of different models on meeting skill needs and on raising and widening participation, the research should illuminate three related tensions which lie at the heart of developments in all four home countries, those between:

- developing FDs or HNs as exit qualifications with value in their own right, and as pathways for progression to honours degrees (Gallacher 2003, Osborne 2003)
- the objective of widening participation and that of meeting skill needs (Osborne 2003)
- standardisation and flexibility; on the one hand, a qualification with more standardised content is likely to have greater currency and transparency and might, therefore, be more attractive to learners and to end-users; on the other hand, a qualification which allows more variation may be more easily tailored to specific employment needs, and may provide a better context for local initiative and partnership.

The fourth research question exploits the longer and apparently more successful experience of Scotland in offering provision at this level, which has already been influential in UK-wide policy developments (NCIHE 1997a, 1997b). It seeks to learn from this experience by following the development of policy in Scotland. For example, this approach may be relevant to the third of the tensions summarised above. Should England and Northern Ireland, where a diversity of models and approaches are being explored, ask why Scotland is currently trying to reduce this diversity and to standardise its HN portfolio?

Comments on research design and existing research

Our research design combines cross-sectional elements (research questions 1–3) with a historical element (question 4, although the other questions also need to be addressed in historical context). The first two questions require analysis of the main strategic documents, possibly supplemented with interviews with policy makers and those responsible for developing foundation degrees and equivalent programmes within each country. The third research question requires more detailed study of the process of developing and delivering foundation degree and HN programmes. This could require qualitative research with staff in colleges and HE institutions, employers and learners. Existing evaluations and reviews of pilot studies, such as the QAA (2003) report cited earlier, and the study by the QAA and the Education and Training Inspectorate in Northern Ireland, would be important resources. However, it may be necessary to negotiate access to evaluations of individual programmes. In time, the research could make use of national data on the outcomes and destinations of HE graduates.

The Scottish sub-study (research question 4) would probably rely on a combination of the above approaches but with a longer historical perspective. It would need to rely more on the secondary literature and on existing data on student flows. Gallacher and MacFarlane (2003) provide a useful guide to these sources.

There is a substantial body of research on FE-HE links, especially in England and Scotland. The special issue of *Higher Education Quarterly* of October 2003 includes articles on the four home countries.

6.5

‘Threshold’ skills for adults

Context

By ‘threshold’ skills we mean the minimum skills required for effective participation in adult life. This is, deliberately, a loose definition. There are many different concepts of such skills, and they are subject to different interpretations. One theme of this study is to compare the different ways in which such concepts are defined and operationalised in the four home countries.

In England, the need to improve adult literacy and numeracy has had a high policy priority since the publication in 1999 of *A Fresh Start*, the report of the working group chaired by Sir Claus Moser (DfEE 1999). The *Skills for Life* strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills in England was launched in 2001, with a new national curriculum and national tests at levels from Entry to Level 2 (DfES 2001b). The strategy includes measures to give financial and other support for learners, to improve information, advice and guidance, to train teachers and to improve opportunities. Target groups include the unemployed, prisoners, public sector employees and workers in low-skilled jobs. The aim is to improve the basic skill levels of 1.5 million adults by 2007, with a milestone of 750,000 by 2004, and to reduce by at least 40% the number of adults in the workforce who lack NVQ 2 or equivalent qualifications by 2010. The *Skills Strategy* (DfES *et al.* 2004) announced that free tuition would be provided for adults pursuing their first full Level 2 qualification; this is being trialled in two English regions.

In Northern Ireland the *Essential Skills for Living Strategy* was launched in 2002 (DELNI 2002a, 2002b), inspired by the International Adult Literacy Survey finding that one quarter of the adult workforce in Northern Ireland had the lowest levels of literacy. The strategy includes the introduction of a new curriculum and qualifications (to be adapted from those developed in England), improved tutor qualifications and a system of tracking learners' progression. By March 2005, 25,000 Essential Skills learners will have been supported. There is currently no proposal to introduce free tuition.

In *Life through Learning: Learning through Life* the Scottish Executive (2003b) announced targets for a reduction in the proportion of working age adults whose highest qualification is below SCQF Level 5 (equivalent to NVQ 2), and a reduction in the proportion of 18–29 year olds whose highest qualification is below SCQF Level 6. It would also continue efforts to raise adult literacy and numeracy skills in 150,000 adults by 2006. The Scottish approach to adult literacy adopts a social practice model, which sees literacy as a key dimension of community regeneration and a part of the wider lifelong learning agenda. This approach treats literacy and numeracy as complex capabilities rather than a simple set of basic skills, and argues that learners are more likely to develop and retain knowledge, skills and understanding if they see them as relevant to their own problems and challenges. Administratively it falls under the umbrella of 'community learning and development'. The lead responsibility lies with Communities Scotland at national level and Community Learning Partnerships at local level. In 2004 the Scottish Executive identified three national priorities for community and development; achievement through learning for adults, achievement through learning for young people, and achievement through building community capacity. The first priority is defined thus; 'achievement through learning for adults, raising standards of achievement through community-based lifelong learning opportunities incorporating the core skills of literacy, numeracy, communications, working with others, problem solving and ICT' (Scottish Executive, 2004a, p.1).

Adult learning in Wales is recognised as an important element in the achievement of social inclusion and individual well-being, as well as having potential for enhancing individual and national prosperity (Powell, Smith and Reakes 2003c). A NIACE survey found that in 2003 more people (42%) participated in learning in Wales than in the rest of the UK, however, 28% of adults in Wales lacked functional basic skills and 32% lacked skills in numeracy (WAG 2002, 2004b). Bohata and Reynolds (2002) stated the importance of engaging communities as well as individuals in learning through community learning, similar to Scotland. A series of policy documents including *The Learning Country* and *Communities First* stressed the importance of adult community-based learning to community regeneration and economic development in Wales, and identified challenges for lifelong learning in the next 10 years. *The National Basic Skills Strategy for Wales* (National Assembly for Wales 2001b) outlined an all-age approach to basic skills among children, young people and adults, and aimed to reduce the number of adults with poor basic skills.

Research questions

- 1** Which different concepts and definitions of the minimum skills required for effective participation in adult life are in use in the four home countries?
- 2** Which policies are being followed in each home country to help adults to acquire these skills, and what are the objectives of these policies?
- 3** What may be learnt from a comparison of the four systems about the effectiveness of different policy approaches and about the practical issues that they raise?
- 4** What may be learnt from a comparison of the ways that policies for threshold skills are organised and delivered in the four systems, of the roles of different agencies and stakeholders and of the locus of responsibility?

Rationale

In each of the home countries there are attempts to define the minimum skills or competences required for effective participation in adult learning. However, the four administrations define this threshold in different ways. Their definitions refer to different sets of competences at different qualification levels, their concepts of threshold skills vary in breadth and in the extent to which they are embedded in a wider context. Moreover, there may be a range of thresholds within each home country, and a need to clarify their relationship. For example, DELNI (2002b, p.10) noted the need for 'clarification... on the relationship and continuum between essential skills and key skills'. In Wales the SEAP 2004 consultation document (WAG 2004b) proposed that the majority of the workforce in Wales should achieve Level 3, and the Learning Workers pilot has targeted workers below this level (Newidiem 2004), but other priorities include improving the levels of basic literacy and numeracy and IT skills in the workforce (Level 1), and ensuring that everyone has generic skills. The document outlines a number of threshold skills for all ages including basic skills, key skills, generic/transferrable skills, vocational skills, job-specific skills and essential skills.

A variety of concepts of threshold skills may be found internationally, as well as within the UK. The European Commission's Working Group set up to examine the issue has proposed a list of 'key competences' which include entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and communication in a foreign language, as well as competences closer to the key or core skills in the UK (EC 2003d). However, there may be a particular value in studying these differences within a context where the basic language and concepts, and the social and economic contexts which define the threshold, are more consistent. A comparative study would illuminate the current concepts of threshold skills and clarify the relationships between different concepts. It would also show how these concepts relate to policy objectives in the four systems.

The study would also compare the impact on policy and practice. A particular definition of threshold skills may drive policy and practice in unintended ways. For example, some of our interviewees suggested that the focus on Level 2 in England had a distorting effect on learning at lower levels. They also suggested that the design of the tests had some unwelcome effects. On the other hand, it was suggested that setting targets for a range of levels in Scotland might send confusing messages. The home countries differ in the status of the thresholds as well as their definition, for example, whether they define an entitlement or a target. So far only England is pursuing a policy of free tuition towards a threshold level, but this is under consideration elsewhere.

Finally, there are differences across the home countries in the programmes that aim to enhance adult basic skills, in the way that they are organised and funded, and in their underpinning philosophies and approaches (for example in the relationship to community development). In each country a wide range of sectors, institutions and agencies is involved. Partnership arrangements are common and it may be hard to identify where responsibilities lie. This raises questions about the effectiveness with which different agencies interact, about accountability, about gaps and overlaps in responsibilities and about the coherence of delivery at the local level. Several interviewees felt that a comparison of these arrangements across the UK could inform further development of policy and provision.

Comments on research design and existing research

A starting point for the proposed study would be a review of local studies and evaluations of initiatives across the UK. NIACE has already done valuable work in this area. Policy and practice for adult basic skills is a key theme of recent European Commission reports (2003a, 2003b) and it has been the subject of an OECD (2003) thematic review and of numerous other studies (Hillage *et al.* 2000, Powell, Smith and Reakes 2003c, Jenkins and Wolf 2004). The Teaching and Learning Programme includes relevant studies, including the project on *Enhancing Skills for Life: Adult Basic Skills and Workplace Learning* and the project on *Policy Learning and Inclusion in the Learning and Skills System*, which examines policies for adult basic skills as one of its three themes (www.tlrp.org). Other TLRP projects cover community-based learning, literacies and learning and inter-agency working; some of these have a home international dimension.

6.6 Credit frameworks

Context

England, Wales and Northern Ireland share a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and a separate higher education framework, both developed since the 1990s. Neither is a credit framework, both are primarily concerned with clarifying the relationships among qualifications, rationalising and eliminating duplication among qualifications, and establishing criteria for quality and relevance. The NQF also has a regulatory function, and it lists the publicly fundable qualifications in England.

Scotland and Wales launched national credit and qualifications frameworks in 2001 and 2003 respectively (SCQF 2001, ELWa 2003a, 2003b). Unlike the NQF these aim to include all qualifications, at all levels, and they are designed to support credit accumulation and transfer. The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) both build upon earlier developments. The SCQF is effectively a federal framework, created by bringing together existing smaller frameworks: the Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme which covers higher education, the framework of National Qualifications which cover much college and school provision, and SVQs which incorporate national occupational standards. The SCQF thus continues a series of unifying reforms in Scotland, which began with the Action Plan which modularised FE in 1984 (Raffe 2003). The CQFW similarly builds on CREDIS, a framework based on FE, together with a developing higher education framework (Reynolds 2001). Both SCQF and CQFW are currently in their implementation phase, and both have ambitious plans to include all qualifications used within Scotland and Wales respectively in a short time span. The first phase of the implementation of the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (NICATS) was launched in 1999 but progress has been slower, partly because of the need to fit in with developments elsewhere in the UK.

In England there was substantial interest in credit approaches in the 1990s, reflected in several publications of the Further Education Unit and the Further Education Development Agency (eg FEU 1992), the Kennedy Report on participation in FE (FEFC 1997) and the Robertson Report on credit in higher education (HEQC 1993). However, the government's view was more cautious. Most developments were at an institutional, local or regional level and mainly affected learners in the FE and adult learning sector (Tait 2003a, 2003b). Open College Networks (OCNs) and HE access programmes played an important role. An inter-consortium agreement on credit was established in England and Wales in the late 1990s and this led to the development of guidance to support the use of credit within the HE qualifications framework in 2001. This covered HE institutions in the Northern and Southern England Consortia, Northern Ireland and Wales. In recent years the government has taken a more active interest in credit, and in its 2003 *Skills Strategy* (DfES *et al.* 2003) it committed itself for the first time to a credit framework for adults. It subsequently encouraged the QCA to link the development of this framework with the Tomlinson Working Group's proposals for 14–19 reform, thereby opening the way to a 14-plus framework, albeit not including higher education. In 2004 the QCA and LSC published *Principles for a Credit Framework for England* (QCA/LSC 2004) and the QCA published outline proposals for a Framework for Achievement (QCA 2004a, 2004b). One of the five principles enunciated in the former document states that the credit framework for England will align with other frameworks, including those being developed elsewhere in the UK.

National qualifications frameworks, and especially credit frameworks, have been described as an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon (Young 2003). Outside the UK there has been most development in New Zealand, South Africa and Australia. Within Europe, Ireland is developing a national framework upon broadly similar lines. The Copenhagen Agreement committed EU member states to developing a credit system for vocational qualifications, and a Technical Working Group is currently developing proposals for a European Credit Transfer System for vocational education and training.

Research questions

- 1** How do the current and proposed frameworks differ with respect to their aims, their scope, their structure and their relation to other policy initiatives which might complement and reinforce them?
- 2** Which strategies have been and are being followed in each home country and in the Republic of Ireland for developing and implementing credit frameworks and for encouraging their use by learners and providers?
- 3** What practical issues are raised by these strategies, and how do they affect the potential impact of credit frameworks? What lessons should be drawn for the further development and implementation of credit frameworks?
- 4** What have been the attitudes and responses of different stakeholders to the introduction of credit frameworks in the four home countries? Which methods have been used to manage the potential conflicts among stakeholders, and which have proved most effective?
- 5** What practical issues are raised by the need for the different frameworks to articulate with each other and with European frameworks? How have authorities in each system responded to these issues, and with what results?

Rationale

There has already been substantial cross-border influence on the development of credit within the UK. On the one hand, progress in Wales and Scotland helped to sustain the arguments for credit in England during a period of government indifference; on the other hand, the need to coordinate activities across the UK has applied a brake on progress in Wales and Northern Ireland, and to a lesser extent in Scotland (Tait 2003a). Interviewees in all four home countries nominated credit frameworks as a topic for home international comparative research. There was also support for comparative research on this topic from 'international' interviewees.

The credit developments in the four home countries (and to a lesser extent in the Republic of Ireland) have many common features (Tait 2003). Nevertheless, they differ in scope (broader in Scotland and Wales than in England), in their previous experience of credit and in their starting points. They also differ in terms of the sectors where efforts are targeted; for example, the college-university interface in Scotland, vocational qualifications in England. It is likely that these differences are associated with different aims, expectations and assumptions about the use of credit, and that these differences are obscured by the seeming similarity of approach. The first research question aims to make these differences explicit. It also explores the concept of policy breadth (Raffe 2003), the extent to which a credit framework is complemented by other policy initiatives which influence how it is implemented and used.

The next three questions concern the implementation process and the management of change. The implementation process covers such issues as promoting awareness and understanding of the framework, encouraging appropriate responses from educational providers, fitting qualifications (and other learning) into the framework, establishing principles for quality assurance, and developing shared understandings about the nature and convertibility of the currency of credit. It also covers the responses of learning providers, the impact on the development of provision within institutions as well as on links between institutions and organisations, the responses of 'owners' of qualifications and other stakeholders, and the impact – if any – on the decisions and experiences of learners themselves. The home countries differ in their approaches to implementation, for example in the way that the process is led or coordinated, in the organisational structures that are created and in the roles of different stakeholders. There are differences in the time frames for implementation and in the stage which it has reached in each country. There are also differences in the balance of 'compositional' approaches (starting with units or learning outcomes) and 'impositional' or top-down approaches to credit. A comparative study could provide important practical lessons for the implementation process.

These questions would also examine the management of change. The issues surrounding qualifications are not merely technical. The value of qualifications is underpinned by trust and authority, they may confer positional advantage on those who hold them, and they may sustain the power of those who award them (Raffe 2003). Introducing a credit framework involves new arrangements for determining the value, level and quality of qualifications; these new arrangements may encroach upon the traditional autonomy of universities and professional associations and they are unlikely to be neutral in their impact upon vested educational, professional or industrial interests. They may also have implications for the governance of education, for example, there is a concern that credit systems may be distorted if they are used for the purposes of regulation or funding. The design and implementation of a credit framework thus have a political dimension. A comparison of the UK systems, with their different cultures and styles of policy-making, could cast light on this dimension and suggest ways to manage the inherent conflicts.

The final question concerns the relationships between different national frameworks and how to ensure that they support mobility and transfer between, as well as within, national borders. Most UK qualifications are available in more than one home country, and many people move between the home countries to study or to work. There is a commitment to ensure that frameworks in the four home countries cohere. There is also an interest in compatibility with other national frameworks, such as that in the Republic of Ireland, and with the European credit system. This creates tensions between national and cross-national interests in the aims, development and implementation of frameworks, between the desire to press ahead with one's own framework and the need for compatibility with wider frameworks whose outlines may not yet be clear, and between top-down and bottom-up approaches to implementation. One international interviewee suggested that Europe might learn from the attempts to coordinate qualifications arrangements across the four countries of the UK.

Comments on research design and existing research

The proposed study would focus on the *process* of developing and introducing a credit framework, and the research design and methods would need to reflect this. It would be primarily concerned with the understandings and perceptions of policy makers and stakeholders responsible for developing and implementing frameworks. However, in those countries where national credit frameworks are relatively advanced, it would be important also to seek evidence of impact at other levels of the system, for example to observe the responses of institutions and to seek the perceptions of teachers and lecturers and learners. A common theme of the introduction of national qualifications and credit frameworks, and of other qualifications reforms, is that from the perspective of policy makers there may appear to be substantial progress, while from the perspective of institutions and users it may appear that little has actually changed.

There is existing research and analytical literature on national credit frameworks on which to draw. Much of this literature focuses on policy strategies and the development of frameworks, and may be of particular value in providing conceptual frameworks for comparing their current approaches across the UK and for identifying their distinctive features in comparison with other countries. For example, Young (2002, 2003) has developed analytical frameworks on the basis of the experience of different countries, including New Zealand and South Africa, whose experience also illuminates issues concerning the change process (Phillips 2003, Republic of South Africa 2002). Qualifications frameworks are a theme of the current OECD activity on *The Influence of Qualifications Systems on Lifelong Learning*. The experience of earlier qualifications reforms, such as introduction of the NVQ/SVQ framework in the UK, is also relevant (Raggatt and Williams 1999).

The Scottish Executive has commissioned an evaluation of the early progress of the SCQF, which is focusing on awareness and understanding of the framework and on the responses of education providers and other stakeholders. The drive to create a European vocational credit system has also prompted research and development work, including a recent QCA study which proposes an eight-level structure and elaborates the concept of 'zones of mutual trust', networks of institutions or other stakeholders within which credit transfer may take place (Coles and Oates 2004). It is too soon for researchers to have studied the impact of national credit frameworks on learners and learning. Research on earlier reforms such as the Scottish Action Plan, CREDIS and the OCNs raises relevant issues even if their findings cannot be directly extrapolated to current national developments (Croxford *et al.* 1991, Davies and Bynner 1999).

6.7 Employer engagement in planning and funding

Context

There were major changes to planning and funding arrangements for learning and skills provision at the beginning of this century, especially in England and Wales. In England the national and local LSCs took over responsibility from the TECs and the FEFC in 2001. In Wales ELWa was established in 2001 with a remit similar in scope to the LSC in England but also embracing the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales. Both reforms were intended to reduce the previous fragmentation of funding arrangements, especially for the 16-plus age group. Nevertheless, despite these earlier changes, the further reform of planning and funding arrangements is still on the agenda in each home country.

The way in which the issues are defined varies across the four systems. In England, as we saw in Section 4, the future of planning and funding is linked with a much wider set of agendas, including regionalisation and area planning, performance management and target-setting, quality assurance and, more broadly, the need to achieve the institutional pre-conditions for curriculum and qualifications reforms such as the proposed 14–19 Diplomas. The LSC has moved college funding to a three-year planning cycle to encourage a longer-term and more strategic approach and to increase flexibility and responsiveness to local needs. Strategic Areas Reviews (StARs) involve local LSCs, local authorities, providers and employers in reviews of planning and provision at an area level (Davies and Fletcher 2004). Regional Skills Partnerships bring together a similar range of stakeholders in order to integrate skills and workforce development with support for innovation and business development and labour market services (DfES 2004c).

The devolved administrations have somewhat different concerns. In Northern Ireland, planning and funding arrangements are set out in *Further Education Means Business* (DELNI 2004) and the Skills Strategy, with an intention to develop a new funding methodology. The aim is to enhance strategic planning of FE provision and to promote collaboration, while taking account of policy developments in England and elsewhere. Unlike in England, the FE sector in Northern Ireland does not set targets for increasing employer engagement within their three-year development plans.

In Scotland future arrangements for funding further and higher education are tied up with the merger of the respective funding councils. A consultation paper in 2004 suggested that universities and colleges become Scottish Tertiary Education Providers, of which there would be four categories (Scottish Executive 2004d). A bill is currently before the Scottish Parliament. The current proposals do not in themselves have strong implications for the methods of funding different institutions or for their relative levels of funding, but they would maintain the current separation of college funding from the funding of schools (including post-compulsory schooling) and the funding of work-based training (through the Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise Networks).

In Wales a unified framework to integrate the planning, commissioning and resourcing for all publicly-funded education and training programmes is being developed. The National Planning and Funding System (NPFS) for post-16 learning (other than HE) aims to provide strategic and comprehensive arrangements for relating learning supply and demand and giving parity of treatment for vocational as well as academic pathways (ELWa 2004a). In 2004 it was announced that ELWa would be merged into the Welsh Assembly government.

A common concern across the UK is the need to enhance employer engagement with education and training. Employers vary widely in their size and in their capacity and willingness to be involved with learning. They may be involved in a number of different ways, including as:

- providers (eg of workplace training)
- purchasers (on behalf of their existing workforce)
- recruiters and, consequently, as transmitters of 'market signals' to institutions and learners
- designers or influencers of standards, curricula and qualifications
- stakeholders and partners in the management and governance of learning.

The notion of employer engagement may be related to any or all of these roles, as Hughes (2004) notes, there is no shared definition of the term across the learning and skills sector.

Governments' concern with employer engagement is reflected in several of the policy areas mentioned above. The success of vocational 14–19 pathways in Wales or of the Tomlinson Diplomas in England will depend on the extent to which employers contribute to their design and delivery and favour graduates of these pathways in their own recruitment. The Foundation Degree Task Force described employer engagement as one of the biggest challenges facing the initiative (DfES 2004b). With respect to apprenticeships, Scottish research found that while employers had a key role in ensuring successful completion of apprenticeships, employer engagement varied greatly (Gallacher *et al.* 2004). It suggested that the Enterprise Network and the sector skills bodies should be requested to work together to engage employers more effectively and to plan and implement training programmes. In England, the LSC's Business Plan 2003–04 sets out targets to increase employer engagement in workforce development. Colleges in England must set targets for employer engagement as part of their three-year planning cycle. Each administration has distinct arrangements for supporting or incentivising employers to engage in learning, although different instruments may be more available in different home countries. For example, the Welsh Assembly Government could not unilaterally impose an employer levy as this would require primary legislation.

Since 2002 the Skills for Business Network – the Sector Skills Development Agency and the Sector Skills Councils – has been an important mechanism for employer engagement in skills. The first SSCs were licensed in 2003 and the network now covers around 80% of the workforce (SSDA 2004). The SSCs are responsible for representing their sectors and their needs to providers, government and public agencies. They are responsible for developing occupational standards, for monitoring the supply and demand of skills and they contribute to the development of vocational qualifications. They cover the whole of the UK, and have to match their activities to the different policies, institutional and regulatory frameworks of each home country. A significant difference in Northern Ireland, compared to the rest of the UK, is that it already has a network of thirteen Sector Training Councils covering certain private sector areas. These are likely to change to fit in with the developing Skills for Business Network.

SSCs are only the latest in a long series of policies attempting to engage employers. The history of employer engagement with skills and with the planning and funding of education and training is a long one, but throughout this period a number of criticisms have persisted:

- the confusion surrounding the ‘crowded landscape’ of intermediary bodies between education and industry (OECD 1999), aggravated by the frequent institutional changes of which the replacement of National Training Organisations by SSCs is only the most recent
- the weakness of such bodies when they are set up, and their tendency to be government-led rather than employer-led in practice
- the tradition of voluntarism
- the policy focus on the supply of skills rather than the demand (Harwood 2004), and the failure to distinguish the needs of employment from the needs of employers
- the absence of agreed roles and responsibilities for employers vis-à-vis other stakeholders in learning and skills (Gleeson and Keep 2004, Keep 2004).

Research questions

- 1** How do the different home countries attempt to engage employers in the planning, delivery and funding of skills development, and to make the system responsive to the needs of employment?
- 2** Which of these approaches have been most successful?
- 3** What lessons can be drawn from the history of earlier attempts to engage employers since the creation of Industry Training Boards in 1964?

Rationale

Employer engagement is one of the most critical challenges facing the future of post-compulsory learning in all home countries. It is critical for ensuring the supply of skills (eg through apprenticeship), for ensuring that high skill levels are demanded, and for ensuring that supply and demand are effectively balanced.

Our proposed research would start from the observation that employer engagement is pursued through a mixture of UK-wide and country-specific approaches. The UK-wide bodies such as the SSDA and the SSCs must interact with the home countries' different skills strategies, different approaches to planning and funding learning provision, different economic development policies, and so on. This complex pattern is of practical research interest in at least three ways. First, it provides a case study of the issues that may arise when 'joined up' policy-making covers areas which are devolved and areas which are reserved to the UK level. Second, comparing different policies or arrangements in practice may help us to identify 'best practice'. Which of the different instruments and levers for securing employer engagement are most effective, and for which types of employers? Third, we can make more strategic comparisons, to see if any home countries have solutions to the recurrent problems affecting employer engagement in the UK. For example, how do the different home countries handle the tension between planning-led and demand-led approaches, and what roles do employers play in either? Has any home country gone further than the others towards reaching a consensus around the relative roles and responsibilities of employers compared with governments, individuals and other stakeholders? How will employer engagement be affected by the different shape of funding arrangements in the different parts of the UK? In England and Wales funding is being organised on an age- and stage-related basis, with common arrangements for post-16 school, college and work-based provision, and with separate higher education funding. In Scotland three separate funding structures will be responsible, respectively, for all school education, for work-based provision, and for the colleges and higher education. This retains separate funding and planning arrangements for the area where employer engagement has traditionally been strongest (work-based learning). Does this strengthen or weaken the overall scale and impact of employer engagement in learning? How would employer engagement be affected in England and Wales by a possible move towards a 14-plus rather than a 16-plus funding regime?

Comments on research design and existing research

One starting point is the large critical literature on employer engagement, including the work of ESRC Centre on Skills Knowledge and Organisational Performance, which identifies many of the problems that current measures are attempting to address (www.wbs.ac.uk).

Hughes (2004) has reviewed the impact of the employer engagement targets for colleges, following *Success for All*. She recommends a typology for employer engagement which takes account of the roles of employers as stakeholders, consumers and strategic partners. This provides a useful conceptual as well as empirical starting point for further research.

Another starting point is the current review of sectoral engagement by York Consulting for the SSDA, reviewing sector skills policies, delivery, mechanisms and initiatives across the English Regions and the devolved administrations. The review is due to be completed by March 2005.

Section 7**Concluding comments**

In Section 6 we have argued for six areas where policy and practice could benefit from home international comparative research. These six areas should be seen as examples of a general argument for making more use of comparisons across the home countries of the UK. In this last section we comment briefly on this general argument.

Our review of current policy issues in post-compulsory learning suggests not only that there is substantial overlap in the issues addressed by the different home countries, but also that they tend to use the same types of policy instruments in order to achieve broadly similar goals for post-compulsory learning. There is therefore sufficient common ground across the home countries for us to be able to define areas of policy in terms sufficiently comparable to study. At the same time, the home countries differ in the ways that these issues come together in policy agendas, in their strategies and measures for dealing with specific issues, and in their institutional and organisational arrangements for addressing them. There is therefore potential for policy learning – if not policy borrowing – from comparing these approaches, and this potential is increased by the fact that the contextual differences which confound other cross-national comparisons are at least relatively small.

A common theme of many of our proposed comparisons is the need to compare the processes of educational change as well as its content and direction. The political devolution of 1999 may have had as much impact on the way in which policies are made and implemented as on the content of those policies. Whether or not the heady aspirations of democratic renewal and popular participation that accompanied devolution have been fully realised, there is a strong case for using the current diversity across the UK to study the dynamics of educational change.

Nevertheless, our evidence shows that home international comparisons are not conducted as often as they might be, and that their influence on policy-making has been small. Moreover, where there has been mutual influence among the home countries this has rarely been based on systematic comparative research, but such research is essential if the lessons that are drawn are to be soundly based. Official policy rhetoric can often be complacent and self-congratulatory, and in the post-devolution euphoria the devolved administrations' own accounts of their policies may exaggerate their distinctiveness as well as their effectiveness. A programme of comparative research needs to challenge this policy rhetoric and to observe policies and institutions in practice. It must also challenge any tendency for policy makers and analysts to make only those comparisons that they expect to support their existing views.

There are practical obstacles to be overcome. Many existing data sources lack comparability or do not cover the whole UK, making home international comparisons as difficult as other cross-national comparisons. However, there have been recent improvements and some data sources, such as the British Household Panel Survey and the Higher Education Statistics Agency data, provide rich resources for home international comparisons. Funding may be difficult to obtain, especially for policy-related analyses where the funding is sought from more than one home country. There is a need for greater coordination among the UK administrations and their agencies to plan and support such research. Finally, policy makers and analysts need to be persuaded that home international comparative research within the UK has a practical value for the development and implementation of policy. We hope that this report may help to persuade them.

Appendix

Acronyms

ACCAC

Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority (Wales)

ALI

Adult Learning Inspectorate (England)

AVCE

Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education

CCEA

Council for Curriculum and Examinations and Assessment (Northern Ireland)

CCET

Community Consortium for Education and Training (Wales)

CEDEFOP

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

CES

Centre for Educational Sociology

CoVE

Centre of Vocational Excellence

CQFW

Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales

CREDIS

Former Welsh credit framework

CS

Communities Scotland

DENI

Department of Education Northern Ireland

DELNI

Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland

DfEE

Department for Education and Employment (England)

DfES

Department for Education and Skills (England)

DTI

Department of Trade and Industry

DWP

Department of Work and Pensions

Dysg

Learning and Skills Development Agency (Wales)

EC

European Commission

ECTS

European Credit Transfer System

ELB

Education and Library Board (Northern Ireland)

ELWa

Education and Learning Wales

EMA

Education Maintenance Allowance

ESCalate

Education Subject Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network

ESRC

Economic and Social Research Council

Estyn

Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training (Wales)

ETAG

Education and Training Action Group (Wales)

ETI

Education and Training Inspectorate (Northern Ireland)

ETLLD

(Scottish Executive)
Enterprise Transport and Lifelong Learning Department

FE

Further Education

FEFC

Further Education Funding Council (England)

GTCS

General Teaching Council for Scotland

HE

Higher Education

HEFCE

Higher Education Funding Council for England

HEFCW

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales

HEQ

Higher Education Quarterly

HMIE

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (Scotland)

HNC/D

Higher National Certificate/Diploma (Scotland)

ICT

Information and Communication Technology

ILAs

Individual Learning Accounts

InCCA

Inter Consortium Agreement on Credit

LCA

Leaving Certificate Applied (Republic of Ireland)

LCVP

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (Republic of Ireland)

LEA

Local Education Authority

LEC

Local Enterprise Company (Scotland)

LSC

Learning and Skills Council (England)

LSDA

Learning and Skills Development Agency

LSRC

Learning and Skills Research Centre

LEA

Local Education Authority

LTS

Learning and Teaching Scotland

MSC

Manpower Services Commission

NCET

National Council for Education and Training (Wales)

NFER

National Foundation for Educational Research (England and Wales)

NIACE

National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (England and Wales)

NICATS

Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme

NPFS

National Planning and Funding System (Wales)

NQF

National Qualifications Framework

NVQ

National Vocational Qualification

OCN

Open College Network (England)

OECD

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

Ofsted

Office for Standards in Education (England)

OPSR

Office of Public Services Reform

PPRB

Post Primary Review Body (Northern Ireland)

QAA

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

QCA

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

RDA

Regional Development Agency
(England)

RPA

Review of Public Administration
(Northern Ireland)

SCQF

Scottish Credit and Qualifications
Framework

SEAP

Skills and Employment Action Plan
(Wales)

SED

Scottish Education Department

SEED

Scottish Executive Education
Department

SEDD

Scottish Executive Development
Department

SFEFC

Scottish Further Education
Funding Council

SFEU

Scottish Further Education Unit

SHEFC

Scottish Higher Education
Funding Council

SOEID

Scottish Office Education and
Industry Department

SRHE

Society for Research into
Higher Education

SQA

Scottish Qualifications Association

SSC

Sector Skills Council

SSDA

Sector Skills Development Agency

StAR

Strategic Area Review (England)

STC

Sector Training Council
(Northern Ireland)

SVQ

Scottish Vocational Qualification

TEAK

Tackling Educational Complexity
Across the United Kingdom

TEC

Training and Enterprise Councils

TLRP

Teaching and Learning Research
Programme

UNESCO

United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNEVOC

UNESCO's Network on Technical
and Vocational Education

WAG

Welsh Assembly Government

WLGA

Welsh Local Government
Association

YOP

Youth Opportunities Programme

YTP

Youth Training Programme
(Northern Ireland)

YTS

Youth Training Scheme

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