

# Comparing Scotland with the rest of the UK: what are the implications for Scottish education policy?

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Seminar on *Educational Attainment and Inequality in Scotland: how does  
Scotland compare with the rest of the UK?*

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# Overview

- Observations on ‘home international’ comparisons
- A few distinctive features of Scottish education
- Differences in attainment, participation and inequality
  - Overview (Scotland compared mainly with England)
  - Points from CES ‘home international’ research projects
- Issues for policy
  - Balancing school diversity and uniformity
  - Balancing flexibility and structure
  - Widening participation in HE
  - Evidence-informed policy
  - Would independence make a difference?

# Policy learning from 'home international' comparisons

- Conventional rationale based on 'other things' being more nearly 'equal' ...
  - ... but still differences in context – and data!
- Aim for policy learning not policy borrowing: more varied types of learning than 'good practice', eg:
  - Benchmarking
  - Distinguishing system-specific from shared problems
  - Clarifying policy options and associated issues
  - Insights to support policy analysis/devpt in own country
- Most important learning is about own system ...
  - Much of presentation indirectly based on comparisons

# Scottish education: distinctive features

- Smaller system – traditional change model is top-down but ‘consensual’
- (Relative) institutional uniformity and clarity of mission
- (More) comprehensive system: rejection of school diversity agenda
- ‘Flexible’ upper-secondary structure – no concept of ‘completion’ of secondary education
- Stratified HE system
- Top-heavy: power of academic and higher education
- A national curriculum – but by other means
- CfE (not independence?) is the main context for school policy debates – the only show in town

# Levels of attainment

- Broadly similar in compulsory education; hard to compare thereafter
- More uniform school effect
- Apparent slower rate of improvement
  - English improvement at least partly spurious (Goodhart's Law)
  - But wider comparisons suggest Scotland's falling behind
  - And point to areas of concern (eg maths in PISA/TIMSS?)
- Curriculum
  - Diverging (or crossing-over) in compulsory education?
  - Slightly broader in Scottish schools post-16
  - But status of (initial) vocational learning remains marginal

# Participation rates

In full-time post-16 education (pre-2013)

- Age comparisons – lower (different age/stage relation)
- Stage comparisons – historically higher in S5, lower in S6 and beyond
- Modest growth in staying-on – but poor comparative data
- Higher NEET rate
- ‘Flexibility’ of courses/quals not a clear benefit

In Higher Education

- Higher overall (56% v 49% 2011 HEIPR), lower in university
- England has narrowed the gap
- Different subject/programme mix

Post-16 and HE patterns mutually sustaining

# Social inequality

In compulsory school

- Similar recent level and trend (slow improvement)
- More comprehensive system – associated with (small, relative) improvement
- Lower school segregation

In post-16 and higher education

- Historically higher in Scotland (pre-Higher Still)
- Recent level and trend similar (very slow improvement)
- Similar processes of inequality
- Sector differences – HEIs less segregated, colleges more important
- Ethnic inequalities

# Policy issues for Scotland

1. Balancing school diversity and uniformity
2. Balancing flexibility and structure
3. Widening participation in HE
4. Evidence-informed policy
5. Would independence make a difference?

# 1. Balancing school diversity and uniformity

- There are arguments for increased school autonomy/diversity
  - OECD, CSR: needed for innovation, system learning, equity
  - CfE: aims for culture change through school ‘ownership’
- But
  - uniform standards and clear missions are strengths of the comprehensive systems
  - And school diversity within CfE presents threats as well as opportunities
- Is there a balance to be struck?
- PS The English discourse of inequality between schools is less applicable to Scotland

## 2. Balancing flexibility and structure

- Flexibility (eg curriculum, mode, pathways) has benefits but
  - is often illusory, and is not a universal panacea
  - issues of cost, participation, equity, clarity, (over-)assessment
- Upper-secondary system – will be even more flexible in CfE Senior Phase
  - Could it perpetuate (exacerbate?) these problems
  - Should we revisit the notion of ‘completion’? (OECD Review)
  - Could a (real) Baccalaureate based on SCQF get the best of both worlds? (But learn from Wales)
- ‘Efficient, flexible learner journeys’ through HE
  - Unlikely to be either efficient or flexible
  - Aim for ‘diverse but well-structured learner journeys’

# 3. Widening participation in HE

Questions raised by a 'home international' comparison:

- Does free tuition promote wider participation?
- What is target for widening participation – all HE or different sectors? (and can we have a genuinely diverse tertiary sector?)
- Why do policies for social mobility focus only on the disadvantaged?
- Are ethnic inequalities sufficiently recognised?

# 4. Evidence-informed policy

An area of relative decline in Scotland since devolution?

- Curriculum for Excellence is the main context for current policy development - why is there no independent evaluation?
- Why has Scotland cut PIRLS and TIMSS – when they clearly don't duplicate PISA?
- Why is Scotland lagging behind Wales (and England) in data and research on participation and transitions?
- Is there a policy-making culture which prefers
  - performance monitoring to explanation?
  - 'global' research to evidence on how the Scottish system works?
  - consensus to evidence?

# 5. Would independence make a difference?

- Most relevant powers over education policy are already devolved
- Further financial powers would be unlikely to transform many issues eg inequalities
- Key determinants lie elsewhere (and are common across UK?)
- Main impact of independence on education could be indirect, if independence led to wider social and economic transformation (eg Nordic model)
- HE constrained by interdependence of systems
  - Independence within the EU might aggravate this
  - But current devolution settlement isn't working: failure of UK-wide coordination