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FE and skills in Scotland: the implications of a policy led and ‘managed’ approach?¹

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FE and skills in Scotland: the implications of a policy led and ‘managed’ approach?

This article considers the implications of a ‘managed’ approach to skills policy in Scotland, in which Government policy and the role of national institutional frameworks can be seen to be influential, and which contrasts with the more marketised approach which has been a central aspect of policy in England.

A number of themes within these national policies are discussed, and the continuing importance of balancing the skills agenda with social inclusion is noted. The ways in which these national policies and frameworks have shaped provision in a number of key areas including apprenticeship programmes, changing patterns of participation, and relationships with employers are then examined. The strengths and limitations of the distinctive approaches taken in Scotland will be analysed in terms of their contribution to meeting the changing educational training needs of the workforce in the 21st century. This consideration of the distinctively policy led and ‘managed’ approach to the skills agenda will provide the context in which to consider the opportunities for policy learning within the UK.

Keywords: Scotland; skills, colleges, apprenticeship, widening access.

Introduction

This article examines the distinctive approach to FE and Skills in Scotland and, in common with other articles in this special issue, it will explore the opportunities for policy learning in a UK context. This can be seen as part of the more general ‘distinctiveness’ of Scottish education (Humes and Bryce, 1999). A key aspect of this approach has been the framework of policy which has been developed by the Scottish Government over more than ten years, since the Scottish National Party (SNP) came to power in 2007. This has led to a sustained, and largely coherent, set of policy initiatives which have shaped provision in colleges. In this paper we ask: how might we characterise the system that has resulted from these policies; what are the key themes

that have been emphasised in FE and skills policy; and what are the consequences for Scotland's colleges?

We argue that policy has given rise to an increasingly 'managed' approach whereby the Scottish Government seeks to steer skills development and coordinate key elements and institutions within the system, including colleges. This is in contrast to the more marketised approach which has emerged in England (Keep 2018). Scotland can also be seen to be further along a continuum of a steadily evolving managed system than either Wales or Northern Ireland. This managed system has, we argue, a dual purpose. It must both generate skills for the wider population to grow Scotland's economy and promote social inclusion amongst economically disadvantaged groups. An emerging theme in Scottish policy has been the recognition of the varied, and sometimes provisional, nature of what is deemed the 'learner journey'. We will examine how this generates a policy ambition to draw together different providers and agencies, to coordinate, support and maximize progression. These 'connective' elements of a strongly managed system have implications for Scotland's colleges; while still important in serving local regions they have a more diffuse role in skills development, contributing towards the journey rather than having a unique role in preparation for work. We will consider how this policy framework has been developing and the implications for Scotland's colleges. It is also necessary to note some of the difficulties associated with introducing changes in policy and practice, and the risks associated with 'quick reforms' (Piltz 2002). The concluding section of this article will consider the opportunities for policy learning through 'home international' cross UK comparisons (Raffe et al. 1999; Canning and Cloonan 2002).

A managed system

In a comparative article Keep draws distinctions between the retention of an education and skills ‘system’ in Scotland, arranged as a series of linked levels and types of provision, with the creeping marketization of English education and skills provision (Keep 2017). Here a ‘system’ approach is contrasted to the promotion of markets, or often quasi markets, that emphasise competition between providers. Key features which have been retained in the Scottish system are a single Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA), a Scottish Funding Council (SFC) responsible for both Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) funding, Skills Development Scotland (SDS) which is responsible for the apprenticeship programmes and careers guidance, an economic development agency Scottish Enterprise (SE) working alongside the region specific Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and a series of sector skills councils. These are all strong pillars of a system that draw their direction from the Scottish Government, and recent policies have reinforced the opportunities for the government to manage this system more closely.

At a macro level, policy has been shaped by the wider political objectives of the SNP (Scottish National Party) led Scottish Government, in power since 2007. The *raison d’être* of the SNP is of course to establish Scotland as an independent country, and to this end they have emphasised the importance of developing a strong and vibrant economy. This has then led to a series of macroeconomic policies, which have in turn shaped provision in colleges. The framework for skills development was laid out in *Skills for Scotland* (Scottish Government 2010) in which two of the key ideas were simplifying skills systems and strengthening partnerships; ideas which were reflected in later policy initiatives. The need for greater co-operation between national skills agencies has been further developed through the *Enterprise and Skills Review* (Scottish

Government 2017). This resulted in the establishment of a Strategic Board for Enterprise and Skills to oversee the work of all of these organisations and promote a common agenda.

Macroeconomic policy has been further developed in *Scotland's Economic Strategy* (Scottish Government 2015) and the *Labour Market Strategy* (Scottish Government 2016). The two strategies emphasise a number of themes. These include the importance of enhancing the skills base through investing in Scotland's people, and promoting and creating opportunities for what has been termed 'fair work' through inclusive policies which will help tackle inequalities in the labour market and provide secure and rewarding employment opportunities (Fair Work Convention 2016). These strategies have also focused on the need to encourage greater use of the skills developed within the workplace, through changes to job design and work organisation. In that sense the recognition of the need for changes in the demand side is distinctively different from the approach taken in England which continues to place emphasis on a supply side model (Keep 2017). So it can be seen that skills policy is firmly embedded in Scotland's wider economic policy, and that this policy is ambitious in the range of contexts and issues which it seeks to influence. They are also policies which the Scottish Government has been pursuing in a systematic way for more than ten years in pursuit of their wider political objectives.

Balancing skills and social inclusion

We have noted above the Scottish Government's stated aim of tackling inequality as part of its Economic Strategy and the emphasis on fair work as part of this. However, with regard to skills this can be seen as part of a broader set of policies to widen access to education and training and create a more socially inclusive society. For example the

final report of the Commission for Widening Access, *A Blueprint for Fairness*, included an extensive list of recommendations to address the persistent inequalities in the further and higher education systems (Commission for Widening Access 2016). While this focuses mainly on access to higher education there is recognition of the need for schools, colleges and universities to work more closely together in achieving ambitious widening access targets. When considering the work of the colleges with respect to skills, this focus on social inclusion must be recognised as a parallel policy agenda for the colleges, and the issue of balancing these two agendas is a recurrent theme in Scottish policy.

Skills policy and the college sector in Scotland

A number of major policy initiatives have sought to reshape the college sector with a view to making it more effective in meeting social and economic needs. Four important themes have emerged which have changed the landscape within which the college sector operates.

The Learner Journey

The concept of the ‘learner journey’ has become a central element in policy. It was first introduced in the White Paper, *Putting Learners at the Centre* (Scottish Government 2011), to highlight the importance of transitions both within the spheres of education and training, and from education to work, and the need to ensure that these are as smooth as possible for those involved. This idea has now been developed more fully in the *Learner Journey Review*, the report of which was published in May 2018 (Scottish Government 2018). This provides a series of recommendations regarding how journeys through the education and training system and into work can be facilitated. While this report focuses on young people, reflecting policy over a number of years, there is also a

recognition of the importance of lifelong learning and retraining; a more recent theme. It would appear that this review will be of importance in shaping the next stage of initiatives in Scotland. Some key elements are a new emphasis on the importance of careers advice and guidance in ensuring that young people make the right choices as they move into the labour market, the pivotal ‘connective’ role which colleges have in the system of vocational education and training, and the need to strengthen links between schools, colleges and the workplace. In this respect the need for better ‘alignment’ between the various sectors is emphasised. The report also reflects the continuing emphasis on social inclusion and widening access, with recognition of the need to focus on ‘all young people who are at risk of disengagement’ (Recommendation 7). Underlying all of this is the central concept of the ‘learner journey’ which recognises that learners need to progress through various stages in their route to the labour market, and that this may be a relatively lengthy and complex one. An idea we will return to.

Regionalisation

The 2011 White Paper raised the issue of the need to reconfigure the provision of non-advanced learning and skills to ensure that it was better aligned with the labour market. In this context the need for a possible restructuring of the college sector and a move towards a regional structure was raised. This coincided with a period of retrenchment in public spending following the 2010 financial crisis. There was also additional pressure resulting from the Scottish Government’s policy of free higher education, and the need to fund this while maintaining Scotland’s reputation for world class higher education. As a result, the period of regionalisation was also a period in which Audit Scotland has noted that funding for the college sector fell by 18% between 2010 and 2014 (Audit Scotland 2015).

The Post 16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013, which followed from the 2011 White Paper, provided the legislative basis for a major restructuring of the college sector with the establishment of regional colleges. This legislation specified that these colleges should have regard to the skills needs of the regions, and also to the need to widen access to under-represented groups. The dual focus for colleges of skills development and widening access continued to be firmly established.

The Scottish Government's policy of regionalisation has radically altered the landscape of the college sector in Scotland. As a result of a process of mergers there are now 27 colleges in place of the 43 which existed previously. There are 10 single college regions and 3 multi-college regions. Alongside the process of mergers and regionalisation the SFC introduced a new approach to funding colleges - Regional Outcome Agreements (ROAs). These ROAs are now the mechanisms which enable the SFC to agree the outcomes through which a college will meet the economic and social needs of the region, and the funding which will be provided to meet these needs.

In the ROA the colleges provide a regional context within which the demographic and economic needs of the region are analysed. These draw on the detailed Regional Skills Assessments (RSAs) and the sectorally-focused Skills Investment Plans (SIPs) provided by SDS. The Scottish Government and the SFC have indicated the strategic priorities they expect colleges to focus on and these inform the ROAs. Arguably, therefore, while the needs of the region are to the fore these are also mediated by the priorities of central government bodies.

Firstly, to promote economic development and growth in the region ROAs will identify key industries and the ways in which the college can support them. This will include involvement in apprenticeship training, education and training for young people, and lifelong learning to meet the needs of existing workers for retraining and

up-skilling. Secondly, it is expected that colleges will promote social inclusion and help widen access to education and training. This will include measures to create opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as second chance opportunities for adult returners. Thirdly, ROAs must also include initiatives to improve the quality of learning and teaching. The fourth area relates to maintaining sustainable and high quality institutions, where outcomes relate to the management of institutions.

It is important to note that ROAs not only provide textual analysis they also commit colleges to quantitative indicators. The headings for these indicators are provided by the SFC, and the colleges' responses are agreed in consultation with SFC staff. The list of quantitative measures include ones relating to skills needs, such as the numbers of students on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) related programmes, starts for contracted apprenticeships, numbers of students with work placement experience, and the proportion of senior phase (school) pupils achieving recognised vocational qualifications in colleges. However a number of the key measures also relate to the wider social inclusion role of the colleges such as ones which specify the numbers of learners from the most deprived post codes, and those with an experience of 'care'. General issues relating to retention and attainment are also emphasised. This in some ways reflects Keep's characterisation of English colleges as providers of last resort to the most vulnerable students (Keep 2018). Scotland's colleges have explicitly been tasked with addressing the priority of social inclusion, but must do so while also making a strategic contribution to the economy.

The SFC is then able to use the ROA to agree funding for each college region and to monitor the impact of colleges both regionally and nationally, which will inform future funding decisions. The introduction of ROAs has given the Scottish Government,

through the SFC, a powerful tool to shape the agendas of colleges throughout Scotland and substantially increases the extent to which it is a heavily managed system. However to date it is not clear to what extent they are enabling Scottish colleges to make a substantially different contribution to skills formation.

Developing the young workforce

Scottish skills policy has seen a particular focus on the needs of younger learners. In 2013 Scottish Government established the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young People under the chairmanship of Sir Ian Wood, a leading figure in the Scottish oil industry, reflecting the concerns over the high rate of youth unemployment and therefore the effectiveness of the education and training system. This commission was asked to consider: how a high quality intermediate vocational education and training system could be developed; how to achieve better connectivity between education and the world of work; and how to achieve a real partnership between employers and education where employers would see themselves as co-investors and co-designers rather than simply customers. Its report *Education Working for All* (Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce 2014) provided the framework for the Scottish Government's strategy document *Developing the Young Workforce* (DYW): *Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy* (Scottish Government 2014). This outlined a seven-year programme to ensure that there would be '...a work relevant educational experience for our young people' (pi). This document has provided a plan of how schools, regional colleges, an expanded apprenticeship programme and employers can be expected to work together to drive forward the creation of a world class vocational education system. A key target was that the 18.8% youth unemployment rate would be reduced by 40% by 2021. Many of the themes of partnership working outlined in the DYW strategy have been developed in the Learner Journey Review.

The emphasis on young people which was central to this strategy has had significant impacts on colleges, including strengthening the links between schools and colleges, establishing a new Foundation Apprenticeship, and changing the patterns of participation in the colleges, all of which will be discussed further below. The strategy placed an emphasis on the need for stronger links between employers and the education and training system, and we will consider below the extent to which this objective is being achieved.

Alignment

The final theme we wish to identify as a consequence of this reshaping of the college sector is the greater emphasis on ‘alignment’. This emerged as a strong theme in the Enterprise and Skills Review and, as noted above, has resulted in the establishment of the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board, a key role for which is to achieve greater alignment of the work of SFC, SDS, SE and HIE. This Board had its first meeting in December 2017, and a Director for Skills Alignment has recently been appointed to work between SFC and SDS. While, at the time of writing, it is too early to judge the impact of this initiative, it re-emphasises the importance in the policy agenda of encouraging more effective partnership working and a willingness to ensure new connections within the ‘system’. The theme of alignment also emerges as an important one in the *Learner Journey Review* in which recommendations recognise the importance of better alignment of the work of schools, colleges and universities in providing stepping-stones to work or further study.

Impact on skills provision in Scotland

Developing Scotland’s apprenticeship programmes

Following from the Wood Commission, the DYW strategy and more recently the

Learner Journey Review, there has been significant work to develop and extend the suite of Scottish apprenticeship programmes. The approach taken here has again been a centrally managed one led by the SDS, rather than the very different one associated with sectoral Trailblazers groups of employers in England. In so far as employers have been given a strengthened role it has been through the establishment of a central Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board (SAAB) which is an employer-led body designed to enhance the position of employers in shaping these programmes.

Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) are the main type of apprenticeship programme and the DYW strategy has encouraged further development. There are more than 80 frameworks, and the processes for development, amendment and approval of these frameworks remains a national one. They are developed by Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) and approved by the Modern Apprenticeship Group (MAG), which is chaired by the Scottish Government, and includes representatives from SDS, SQA, the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC), Scotland's Colleges, the Scottish Training Federation and the Sector Skills Councils. In 2016-7 there were more than 27,000 starts on MAs, 68% of these were at Level 3 or above, with 44% in the 16-19 age group (SDS 2018a). The Scottish Government target is to have at least 30,000 starts by 2020, and to encourage a greater emphasis on STEM subjects. While colleges are involved with the provision of MAs, only around 8% of starts involve direct contracts with colleges, although this figure may go up to around 20% with sub-contracting of parts of the MA programmes to colleges. In contrast Independent Training Providers have a major role in the provision of MAs.

Following the Wood Commission and the DYW strategy it was recommended that the MA programme should be extended back into schools through the establishment of Foundation Apprenticeships (FAs), which would be supported through

school-college partnerships. FAs are two-year programmes which are available to pupils in the two senior years of secondary school (S5 & S6). They can be taken alongside Highers (the traditional academic qualification for senior school pupils in Scotland), representing an attempt to tackle the academic/vocational divide which is seen by many as a negative aspect of the educational tradition in Scotland (Iannelli and Raffe 2007). The FA is now recognised for entry to university by all the Scottish universities, and also provides the opportunity for advanced entry to a MA programme. The distinctive aspect of FAs is that pupils will attend college, to develop vocational skills, and have a work-based element as part of their programme (Scottish Government 2014). These are all intended to make it an attractive prospect for those more able pupils who are interested in vocational subjects.

Development of these programmes has been led centrally by SDS in partnership with the SQA, schools, colleges, and relevant employers. The first two national cohorts were recruited in 2016 and 2017, and by August 2018 the aim is for 2600 starts across the 12 available frameworks. The longer term aim is to involve every school in Scotland by 2020. While SDS have published a progress report drawing on the experience of the first two FA cohorts (SDS 2018b), there has to date been no systematic independent evaluation of the impact of these programmes, and it is too early to comment on their longer term impact. However, it seems unlikely that they will challenge the dominance of the more academic Higher and Advanced Higher qualifications, and in this respect they may remain a relatively peripheral aspect of the senior school experience in Scotland.

The third element in the apprenticeship programme is Graduate Apprenticeships, where a higher education level qualification is embedded as part of an apprenticeship. This programme is again being centrally led by SDS which has taken a strong role by

commissioning the first rounds with providers. This contrasts with England where the development of new Apprenticeship Standards for Higher and Degree Apprenticeships has been led by groups of employers, who draw on national guidance (Institute for Apprenticeships 2017). In Scotland there are at present 11 programmes, mainly at bachelor or master's level. It is interesting to note that strong central management has not resulted in a convincing role for colleges in Graduate Apprenticeships. In commissioning the pilot programmes, SDS has sent a clear signal that universities are the locus of development, with only one college being included among initial providers, and only one Graduate Apprenticeship specifying a sub-degree award.

A further distinctive aspect of apprenticeship policy is the use of the Apprenticeship Levy which has been established by the UK Government. Rather than using it to directly fund apprenticeship training among levy payers, as in England, the Scottish Government has stated that it will use it in a more general way to support skills, training and employment in Scotland. Furthermore a Flexible Workforce Development Fund has also been established, with annual funding of £10 million from the Apprenticeship Levy. This makes available grants of up to £15,000 annually to support the up-skilling and reskilling needs of the workforce of levy paying employers or those in their supply chain. This is delivered through the colleges.

Overall apprenticeship programmes have been expanded as a result of Scottish Government policy, mainly through the agency of SDS. Development has been linked to the needs of the Scottish economy on the basis of the analysis provided through RSAs and SIPs, and by ensuring that there is an appropriate range of subject areas in apprenticeships at all three levels to meet these needs. However, while colleges have a key role in new developments at the Foundation Apprenticeship level, their role with respect to Modern Apprenticeships continues to be limited and for Graduate

Apprenticeships it could be described as marginal. Given the continuing emphasis on the key role which colleges have in the system of vocational education and training in policy, this raises important questions as to whether and how this role could be enhanced.

Patterns of participation in Scotland's colleges

The impact of the very strong policy steers from the Scottish Government and the SFC can be seen in the significant changes in the patterns of participation in Scotland's colleges over the period since the SNP government came to power. In the first place the total number of students in the sector has declined markedly (Table 1).

Table 1

The reduction of funding for colleges between 2010 and 2014 which we have noted above will clearly have contributed to this decline in numbers, but a number of other factors have also been important. In particular colleges have been encouraged to have a greater focus on full-time programmes for younger students (those aged 24 or younger increasing as a percentage of the college population from 44% in 2005-06 to 58% in 2016-17) which lead to recognised qualifications. As a result the numbers of full-time students as a percentage of all students has also increased from 17% in 2005-06 to 31% in 2016-17, while the numbers of part-time students has fallen in actual numbers and as a percentage of the total. It can also be noted that this has had the effect of producing a marked decline in the numbers of students studying at FE level, while those at HE level have remained relatively constant. The impact of these changes can also be seen in participation rates in HNC/Ds² which are of significance in

² Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) are located at the same level as the first and second year respectively of full-time higher education.

understanding the place of higher level vocational qualifications in the system. For many years part-time HNCs, which were taken as in-work training by many students, were a significant part of provision in the Scottish colleges. However, as can be seen from Table 2, the numbers of HNC students have been declining while the number of HND students have been increasing.

Table 2

Associated with this change the numbers and percentages of part-time HNC/D students have been declining. While in 2005-06 32% of all HNC/D students were part-time this had declined to 16% by 2015-16, and when HND students only are considered, 95% of them are full-time. These changes are part of a wider development in which many students now use these qualifications to progress to bachelor degree programmes in universities, rather than as terminal vocational qualifications (Gallacher 2017), a development which has been actively encouraged by the SFC through its articulation policies which have been designed to strengthen links between colleges and universities (SFC 2008). This college route into degree level study has also become an important element in Scotland's policies to widen access to higher education (Hunter Blackburn et al. 2016), and has been a focus of attention in the recommendations of the Commission For Widening Access (2016), and the work of Scotland's Commissioner for Fair Access (Commissioner for Fair Access 2017). The important role of colleges in widening access and social inclusion is also seen in data published by the SFC which shows the increasing percentages of students from the most socially and economically deprived quintile (Table 3).

Table 3

We have commented above on the extent to which, while the vocational role of colleges is often emphasised in national policy, their contribution to social inclusion and

widening access is also a major theme, and it is certainly one which is closely monitored. In so far as there are clear indicators, there are perhaps more which provide evidence of success with respect to social inclusion than point to a distinct contribution to the skills agenda.

With respect to the more limited direct contribution of colleges to the skills agenda, we have already noted that only 8% of starts in Modern Apprenticeships involve direct contracts with employers. The more indirect contribution which colleges make to skills is also seen in limited numbers of students who progress directly into work on completing a college course. Data collected by the SFC now provide evidence on progression routes for full-time college qualifiers. It can be seen from Table 4 that only around 20% of all full-time college qualifiers progress directly into work, with most progressing to another course, either in a college or to a university.

Table 4

Among those studying at HE level the figure progressing straight into work is higher at 26%, while for those at FE level it is the slightly lower figure of 17%. Among the students who leave the college sector, rather than proceed to further study within it, 42% proceed to university, while 47% enter employment. These figures regarding the destinations of students, together with the increasing focus on full-time rather than part-time programmes, provide support for the argument that colleges are now part of the ‘learner journey’ for many students rather than a final destination before exiting into employment. There is evidence that in many countries more and more young people are choosing to complete higher education level education rather than entering employment and studying part-time, and indeed this is what employers now expect (Reeve and Gallacher 2019). This might also be seen to fit well with the importance of the idea of the learner journey in Scottish policy. However recent research by Green and Henseke

(2017) has suggested that there is a stable picture of underemployment which affects approximately 30% of UK graduates per year, and debate has centred on the extent to which some degrees are an appropriate preparation for work. In this context it seems disappointing that colleges have such a limited role in the provision of Graduate Apprenticeships, which are intended to develop high level, specifically vocational, skills. In Scotland, as we have seen, development of these programmes has been centrally managed to respond to perceived employment opportunities. Yet Scotland's colleges have not had a significant role in this new vocational programme.

Relationships with employers

The importance of improving relationships with employers and the education and training system has been a central theme in almost all recent policy initiatives. Aspects of this aim are monitored through the ROAs, e.g. through their focus on opportunities for work placements or work-based learning. However there is little clear evidence of substantial progress towards this objective. We have noted above that colleges have only limited involvement in the Modern Apprenticeship programme, and that colleges have been moving more towards full-time programmes, often at a higher education level, rather than focus on work-based, part-time programmes.

The Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL 2013) emphasised the importance of a 'a clear line of sight to work' and suggested that the best provision they had seen was collaborative in nature and based on what they described as a 'two way street' between providers and employers. These themes were also taken up by James and Unwin in their discussion of the conditions for developing high quality vocational further education in Wales (James and Unwin 2016). However there is no clear evidence, despite the policy focus on employer involvement, that this 'two way street' is a major part of provision in Scotland's Colleges. While a 'skills

utilization' programme was launched by the Scottish Government with funding through the SFC, which was designed to foster closer links between employers and the education and training providers, in his evaluation Payne concluded that employer involvement remained limited (Payne 2011). This problem is of course not unique to Scotland, and it is one of the issues around about which there may be some opportunities for policy learning across the UK countries. Arguably, however, it points to the limitations of the highly-managed system which has emerged from Scottish policy. While national agencies and colleges themselves can be reconfigured with the aim of promoting partnership, little can be done by central agencies to lever change amongst the more autonomous employers, despite the interest in demand side issues shown in Scotland.

Opportunities for policy learning

We have noted that the approach adopted in Scotland is very much a policy driven one which differs markedly from the more market-based approach in England, and that Scotland has also seen a longer period of consistent policy development around skills than either Wales or Northern Ireland (see the other articles in this special issue). Nevertheless, the seminar series out of which this and the other articles in this journal have emerged has been exploring the extent to which there are signs of convergence in policy and provision across the UK. Drawing on the issues discussed in this article it would appear that a number of opportunities now exist for policy learning.

Regional collaboration

We have discussed the importance of the regional college framework which has been established in Scotland, and the ROAs which are now being used to shape college provision and direct funding. While Scotland has gone further down this route similar

developments can be seen in other three UK countries. In England there have been the Area Based Reviews (ABRs) (House of Commons 2018), while Wales and Northern Ireland have both seen programmes of college mergers and the establishment of regional colleges (James and Unwin 2016). There have been differences in the approaches to this issue of regionalisation between all four countries, and in all cases it can be seen as work in progress, which provides opportunities for policy learning. In the Scottish context, the introduction of regionalisation has arguably strengthened the levers through which central agencies can exert control over colleges, through the monitoring of key targets. While the Scottish model of ROAs is now a well developed one, from which other countries in the UK could learn, the extent to which it is reshaping skills provision in the colleges and producing a distinctive contribution remains unclear, and there may be opportunities for colleagues in Scotland to learn from developments in other parts of the UK.

Relationships with employers

The need to find new ways of establishing successful partnerships with employers can be seen to have been a recurrent theme in Scottish policy in recent years. Despite the clear policy interest in this issue in Scotland, and high level initiatives, such as the establishment of the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board, it is not clear what progress has been made on the ground at the college level. We have also noted the relatively limited level of involvement of colleges in the apprenticeship programmes, and in the development of higher level vocational qualifications (Reeve and Gallacher 2019). This theme has also emerged in discussions in England (Hodgson & Spours 2017) and in Wales (James & Unwin 2016), and there is general agreement that the absence of a strong social partnership model with employers, such as is found in Germany, Switzerland or Austria, indicates a need to find better ways of establishing

partnerships within the UK. One model which has aroused some interest is the skills ecosystem model, developed initially by Finegold in California (Finegold 1999), and then explored in other context such as Australia (Buchanan et al. 2001). Hodgson and Spours (2017) introduced this model as a potentially promising one, through which colleges could work more productively with employers and other partners, in the first of the UK FE and Skills seminars. There has also been considerable interest in this approach in Scotland, particularly associated with the initiatives around skills utilisation (Payne 2008). However the processes through which an approach of this kind can be successfully established and real change achieved are ones which will require a great deal of difficult work. Finegold has discussed the need to ‘nourish’ skills ecosystems. Buchanan et al. (2016) in their review of developments in Australia, Scotland and the USA, comment on the difficulties of establishing the conditions for self-sustaining skills ecosystems, and the problems involved in moving from models which emphasise supply side issues to ones which fully incorporate the demand side. This may be particularly the case in the Scottish context where policy has often constructed national representative structures to channel employer involvement. Arguably the highly managed system we have been describing results in a practical focus on those elements that can be managed, which lie on the supply side. So, while improving partnerships with employers remains a key problem it is clearly one in which a great deal of policy learning will be required.

The Learner Journey

We have noted that the concept of the learner journey has now become a central one in Scottish policy, and considerably more work has been done in Scotland on this issue than in other UK countries, but it remains a work in progress. Recent analysis in Scotland associated with the Learner Journey Review, the Commission For Widening

Access and the Report of the Commissioner for Fair Access all identify problematic issues. We have also noted that a relatively low percentage of full-time qualifiers progress from college to employment, suggesting that the learner journey is becoming elongated and colleges often have a more limited vocational role. Colleagues in Scotland may wish to learn from other parts of the UK about how the role of colleges in vocational training can be enhanced.

Balancing skills and social inclusion

We have highlighted the fact that the crucial role of Scotland's colleges in widening access and contributing to social inclusion has permeated recent policy in Scotland. This is of course also a key theme in the other UK countries. A shared issue therefore is how an emphasis on social inclusion can be balanced in a satisfactory way with skills development, particularly in a context of reduced resource. Some indicators might suggest that in Scotland the colleges achieve more with respect to social inclusion than in the promotion of skills, and there may be opportunities for policy learning from other UK countries in this respect.

Concluding remarks

In this article we have identified the ways in which policy in Scotland has resulted in, and continues to construct, a highly managed education and training system. This system promotes, and at times imposes, collaboration between the constituent parts. We have indicated that, despite a process of regionalisation, the influence of central government agencies remains strong, not least through the mechanism of the ROAs. Through this strongly managed system the Scottish Government has attempted to push forward its dual agenda of developing the Scottish economy and promoting social inclusion. However, while strategies such as DYW have aimed to make employers full

partners in the skills agenda, there is so far only limited evidence of success in this respect. This can be seen as an indication of the limitations of a managed system in which government and its agencies can have significant impacts on the supply side, but their influence on the demand side is more limited. While these agencies can nudge employers they cannot manage them in the same way. The aim of developing a significantly new and better relationship between colleges and employers continues to be ‘work in progress’.

While the history of education and training policy in Scotland has diverged from that in other UK nations, an issue which has been extensively discussed in the UK and wider literature (Howieson et al 1997; Piltz and Deissinger 2001) we have also pointed to areas of convergence in both policy interest and emerging practice. The common interests in problematic issues such as developing relationships with employers, the balance of social inclusion and skills provision, and the role of the regions in college policy suggest that there is much to learn from further comparison.

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Table 1. Participation in Scotland's Colleges by level of study (student numbers and percentages)

	2005-06		2016-17	
HE level	47,371	13%	47,990	20%
FE level	301,695	87%	197,391	80%
Total	358,066	100%	245,381	100%

Source: SFC 2018a

Table 2. HNC & HND students in Scotland's Colleges (numbers and percentages)

	2005-06	2016-17
HND	16452 (45%)	19459 (52%)
HNC	20257 (55%)	17914(48%)
HND+HNC	36709	37373

Source: SFC 2018a

Table 3. Proportion of Scottish domiciled colleges entrants from the most deprived quintile by mode and level 2002-03 & 2015-16

	HE		FE	
	2002-03	2015-16	2002-03	2015-16
Full-time	25%	28%	29%	34%
Part-time	18%	20%	24%	30%

Source: SFC 2017

Table 4. Destinations of full-time college students 2015-16 (% of all qualifiers with confirmed destinations)

Progression Route	Full-time qualifiers
Further Study	75%
Work	20%
Unemployed	4%
Other destinations	1%
Total number	44,71650,682

SFC 2018b