Lifelong learning policies for vulnerable young adults in post-recession Scotland.

Oscar Valiente, Kevin Lowden & Queralt Capsada-Munsech

School of Education, University of Glasgow, UK

Oscar Valiente (Oscar.valiente@glasgow.ac.uk) St Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow, G3 6NH.

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This article shows how the Scottish Government's (SG) political management of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) has reinforced the economic goals of lifelong learning (LLL) under the skills for work agenda. Youth unemployment has been prioritised as the main social problem to be addressed, and most of the limited public resources for LLL have been targeted towards youth at risk of unemployment at the expense of the rest of the adult population. The article adopts a Cultural Political Economy perspective to examine LLL policy discourses contained in 12 policy documents published by the SG during the period between the Scottish National Party's arrival in power and the Independence Referendum (2007-14). The analysis draws attention to the fact that the GFC has been used by the SG to legitimize selective cuts to the further education sector as well as a stronger labour market orientation within LLL provision.

Keywords: education policy; lifelong learning; political economy; vocational education; youth employment; financial crisis.

Introduction

Lifelong Learning (LLL) has become a concept that permeates education policymaking globally (Jakobi 2009). As often happens with global policy ideas, its specific meaning tends to vary largely across countries and time (Schuetze 2006). The Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008 (GFC) is an excellent opportunity to test to what extent, and through which policy mechanisms, the political management of the crisis has had an impact on the meaning and goals of LLL in national policies targeting vulnerable young adults. As shown by the literature in critical policy studies (Hay 1999; Jessop 2011, 2015), economic crises influence the material circumstances of public policymaking (e.g. through rising unemployment and fiscal constraints), but they also offer an opportunity for the advancement and discursive legitimisation of new economic and social imaginaries and policy reforms. The impact of economic crises on education policy is becoming an area of growing interest in the sociology of education (Peters, Paraskeva, and Besley 2015), but we cannot assume a direct impact of 'capital crises' on educational change (Rikowski 2015) without investigating the material and discursive mechanisms between these phenomena.

This paper provides a critical policy analysis of LLL reforms that have targeted vulnerable young adults following the GFC in Scotland. The Scottish case is particularly interesting for international research on LLL because the Scottish elections of 2007 initiated an uninterrupted cycle of nationalist and centrist Scottish National Party (SNP) governments that resulted in an intensive period of policy reforms and led to the Independence Referendum held in September 2014. The coincidence of this political

2

change with the irruption of the GFC allows us to examine how the interplay between changes in political preferences and economic circumstances have shaped LLL policy developments in Scotland through the recession and post-recession periods[1].

The paper adopts a Cultural Political Economy (CPE) approach (Jessop, 2010; Sum & Jessop, 2013) to investigate the material and discursive explanatory mechanisms of policy changes in government agendas, the construction of target groups and governance technologies in LLL policies in Scotland from 2007 to 2014. The paper draws on a critical analysis of policy discourses contained in 12 policy documents published by the Scottish Government (SG)[2] during the period under study. This analysis shows how changes in government agendas influence the expectations placed on young adults, especially on those in vulnerable situations, and the government technologies implemented by LLL policies. In terms of the explanatory mechanisms of these changes, the challenging economic contexts of the recession and post-recession periods (i.e. rise in unemployment rate, fiscal constraints) appear as a barrier to some of the SG's political ambitions, but also as a facilitator for the advancement of austerity measures in the college sector and a narrower understanding of LLL as skills for employment.

The political context of LLL in Scotland

From an institutional perspective, formal post-compulsory education in Scotland is funded by the state and delivered by colleges and universities. Colleges provide vocational and non-vocational education courses as part of their further education offer. Non-formal learning is mainly provided by local Community Learning and Development Departments (CLDs) and voluntary organisations. For the past few decades, Scotland has experienced a massive expansion in post-compulsory education, especially at the tertiary level[3], but the proportion of early school leavers in Scotland is higher than in its neighbour countries[4]. In 2016, the share of youth aged 15-24 neither in employment, education or training (NEETs)

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[1] The GFC of 2007-2008 caused the Great Recession in the United Kingdom, which lasted for five quarters, from 2008 Q2 to 2009 Q2 (Office for National Statistics 2013). Although the consequences of the Great Recession on employment reached its pick later in 2011, the post-recession refers to the period that started in 2009 Q3.

[2] The original Scotland Act 1998 gave the name "Scottish Executive" as the legal term for the devolved government. In January 2001, the then First Minister Henry McLeish suggested changing the official name from "Scottish Executive" to "Scottish Government". On 2 September 2007, the SNP minority government announced that the Scottish Executive was to be re-branded as the "Scottish Government". We will use the term 'Scottish Government' throughout the text to avoid confusion.

[3] Tertiary education attainment of the 30-34 year-old population is 59.9% and 47.8% for those aged 25-64, Eurostat 2016.

[4] The proportion of early school leavers in Scotland (13,1%) is higher than in the UK (11,2%) and the EU (10,7%), Eurostat 2016.

was 11.9%, and has remained fairly similar since then, converging with the UK (10.9%) and EU averages (11.5%). Although Scotland is committed to an education system that promotes equity and fairness for all, large inequalities in educational attainment by social background persist (Ormston et al. 2007; Weedon and Riddell 2013).

Compared to the rest of the UK, Scotland was comparatively slower in developing an organised adult education landscape (Cook 2006). Historically, the Workers Educational Association and the trade union movement have been lees prominent in adult education than in England, but the influence of local government has been, and remains, stronger in Scotland (Field 2015). Considered as the landmark in the development of adult education in Scotland, the Alexander Report (1975) advocated for the expansion of the adult education provision, particularly concentrated on the disadvantaged, and its integration with youth and community development areas in local government (Mark 2013). The report identified groups less likely to participate in adult education and who could beneficiate of it, suggesting a restructure of adult education into community education services.

New Labour governments in Scotland, since their electoral victories from 1997 onwards, adopted an idea of LLL strongly aligned with the European agenda on economic competitiveness and social cohesion. In parallel, the devolution of education powers to the new Scottish Parliament in 1999 was a turning point in education policy in Scotland. The SG used the idea of LLL as a discursive solution to articulate their political concerns for social justice and international competitiveness (Cook 2006). The LLL agenda of the SG aimed to tackle social exclusion by expanding the learning opportunities of disadvantaged populations and supporting them to get into work. This new strategic line led by New Labour was laid out in the Green Paper *Opportunity Scotland* (Scottish Office 1998). The policy emphasised the vocational orientation of post-compulsory education (i.e. through work-based learning) and highlighted its role in addressing social inequalities (Weedon and Riddell 2013).

After this initial policy document, the Scottish Parliament's Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee undertook an inquiry which led to the first LLL strategy for Scotland entitled *Life through Learning: Learning through Life* (Scottish Government 2003). This important political process resulted in a conception of LLL that went beyond the economic orientation of the previous policy document and emphasised the need to provide educational opportunities that facilitate citizens' participation in economic, social and civic life. The strategy bore some similarity to New Labour's 1998 Green Paper, *The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain* (DfEE 1998), which emphasised the contribution of lifelong learning to building 'human capital' through promoting creativity, skill and imagination and linked this to the future success of the UK. On the other hand, the *Life through Learning: Learning through Life* (Scottish Government,2003) strategy placed stronger emphasis on widening participation in higher education as a distinctive characteristic of the Scottish model of education (Mooney & Poole, 2004).

Giving continuity to this LLL strategy, in 2006 the SG initiated a consultation process which focused on employers' engagement, information and guidance to further strengthen the links between education and the labour market. This consultation and cooperative process in one of the devolved areas has been identified as the starting point of the so-called *'Scottish approach'* to policy making (Cairney, Russell, and Denny 2015), which is based on a political preference for wider consultation and consensual policy solutions.

The Scottish Parliamentary elections in May 2007 brought to an end to eight years of Labour-led Government with the election of an SNP minority government. This political event contributed to the gradual differentiation of the LLL policy landscape in Scotland from the rest of the UK. The arrival of the SNP Government put the development of a strong and sustainable economy at the forefront of its strategy to establish a hypothetical independent Scotland. The SNP government's twin objectives of promoting economic growth and social inclusion have been a continuing source of tension since its arrival in office.

In terms of social inclusion, the implementation of the new Curriculum for Excellence (Priestley and Humes 2010) and the removal of university tuition fees (Riddell et al. 2015) formed their main education reforms. In terms of economic growth, the earlier LLL strategy was quickly replaced with a new skills strategy that focused on enhancing the productivity and competitiveness of the national economy. The discursive shift from LLL to skills indicated a political preference for a more economic orientation within education and training, although many of the ideas underlying this skills agenda were already present in the latest policy developments adopted by the Labour-led government (Mark 2013). The skills strategy introduced a renewed interest in developing a demand-led skills delivery system, more responsive to both individuals' and employers' needs. The main distinctive characteristic of this skills strategy was the focus on skills utilisation, in contrast to the traditional supply side fundamentalism that has dominated skills agendas in England (Field 2009; Payne 2009; Keep 2017).

The nationalist ideology of the SNP has been a very powerful driver of the purposive differentiation of Scottish LLL policy agendas from those adopted in England (Arnott and Ozga 2010). However, any explanation of LLL policy changes during the last decade of SNP Governments requires close examination of the interplay between the ruling party's political preferences and the economic context created by the GFC (Field 2015), which constitutes the main focus of this paper.

Methodology

The conceptual framework for this paper, Cultural Political Economy (CPE), recognises the discursive nature of policy and emphasises analysis of the relationship between discursive and material elements of social life rather than just discourse when explaining policy changes (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 2013). It also goes beyond the analysis of *'policy as text in context'* to analyse how policy imaginaries become hegemonic interpretations of policy problems and solutions in different social domains (e.g. education). The critical nature of CPE serves the de-naturalization and re-politicization of policy agendas (e.g. skills agenda) as taken-for-granted discourses that place expectations on their beneficiaries (e.g. young people) and shape the formation of subjects and subjectivities. Furthermore, governance technologies play a key role in the selection and retention of specific policy discourses insofar as they provide reference points not only for meaning-making but also for the coordination of actions within and across specific personal interactions, organizations and networks. The research questions emerging from this framework include: What political and economic imaginaries did drive the adoption of LLL policy agendas in Scotland? What expectations did these LLL policy agendas generate and place on vulnerable young adults as their main beneficiaries? And what governance technologies were put in place to retain and sediment these LLL policies among social actors?

The selection of policy documents to conduct this research was initially limited to the national policy documents published between the Scottish National Party's arrival in power in 2007 and the Independence Referendum of 2014. However, after an initial exercise of mapping and scoping, we decided to include one additional key document (*More Chances More Choices*, 2006) because of its centrality to LLL in Scotland. The mapping and selection of policy documents was based on a desk review as well as information provided by national and local policy actors. Given our focus on policies targeting vulnerable young adults, we did not include policy documents that were only related to the higher education sector. Twelve policy documents were selected for in-depth content analysis, which indicates the intensive LLL policy activity in Scotland during this period. The policy documents cover the following areas: school curriculum (Scottish Government 2009, 2008), further education (Scottish Government, 2011b), post-16 transitions (Scottish Executive, 2006; Scottish Government, 2010a, 2012b), youth employment (Scottish Government, 2012a, 2014b, 2014c), adult skills (Scottish Government, 2007b, 2010b) and adult education (Scottish Government, 2014a).

Policy discourses mapped out through the analysis of policy documents became the entry point for examining the policy frameworks behind each policy. The extraction of information from the documents was organized according to the three evolutionary mechanisms suggested by the CPE approach: variation, selection and retention. An extraction template was developed to facilitate the operativization of the three mechanisms, which allowed to interrogate each policy document and thematically codify the discursive evidence. The questions used in the template were:

 1) *Variation*: 'Which are the triggers of variation/innovation identified by the document?', 'How does the document define the social and educational problems to be addressed?', and 'What political and economic imaginaries guide the problematization of educational issues?'

2) *Selection*: 'How is defined what is desirable, possible and feasible in a particular national and sectorial context and how these policy solutions will transform these horizons?' 'How urgent is the adoption of these policy solutions and what are the risks associated to the inaction?', and 'What is the rationale behind the selection of these policy solutions over alternative courses of action?'

3) *Retention*: 'How the policy document allocates responsibilities of monitoring, implementation, enactment and evaluation of this intervention and what is the rationale behind these allocations?', 'What governance technologies are put in place to govern the subjects (beneficiaries, target groups, practitioners) and assure sustainable effects?', and 'What desired subject qualities are pursued among beneficiaries and practitioners?'

Two members of the team applied the same extraction template independently to each document and the resulting codes were later discussed and agreed in joint team meetings. This allowed a descriptive mapping of the main discursive elements of the policies, informing team analytical discussions that focused on identifying cross-cutting meta-themes (Bowen 2009; Schreier 2012) in relation to changing policy agendas, target groups and governance technologies.

Despite the rigour in the research procedures and the large amount of policy documents analysed, the team was aware of the limitations of restricting the political economy analysis only to policy documents. While documental analysis is particularly useful for capturing the dominant policy discourses that have guided the reforms, it does not capture adequately alternative policy discourses that might have been present in the adoption of these policies, as well as material institutional factors

that could have shaped the final selection and retention of these policies both at national and local level. In order to mitigate these risks, the results of this analysis were contextualised and contrasted with those from a review of LLL policy initiatives in two Scottish regions as well as debates with key policy actors and experts in two sessions of the National Advisory Board of the YOUNG_ADULLLT project[5].

The political economy of LLL reforms in Scotland (2007-2014)

The skills for work agenda

Two main sources of variation in LLL policy agendas can be identified for the period under study: one political and one economic. In the political realm, the main aim of the SNP's since its arrival into power was to develop a strong economy that would support an independent Scotland. In the economic realm, the GFC and its further impact on unemployment and public finances during the recession and post-recession periods was also crucial. On the one hand, the content and level of ambition of the SG skills agenda had to be redesigned as a result of the social and economic context generated by the GFC (i.e. more limited employment opportunities). On the other hand, the SNP Government managed to pass large reforms of the sector with little political resistance, such as the regionalisation of colleges[6] and the creation of vocational pathways in secondary education, because it discursively presented them as adequate policy solutions in a context of fiscal austerity and high youth unemployment.

The SNP Government placed the skills agenda at the very centre of LLL policy from the outset of its administration. The skills strategy of 2007 (Scottish Government, 2007b) demonstrated great political ambition in a moment of sustained economic growth: establishing the economic orientation of this agenda and its focus on enhancing economic growth and productivity (Scottish Government, 2007b, p. 11). If '*employability approaches'* to skills formation tend to focus on improving the provision of education and ensuring its adaptation to the demands of employers, the policy discourse of the Scottish skills strategy adopted a more ambitious *'skills utilisation approach'* that also questioned the competitive strategies and practices of firms:

  Simply adding more skills to the workforce will not secure the full benefit for our economy unless
 employers and individuals maximise the benefits that they can derive from these skills. […] We need to
 move beyond a focus on meeting the current demand for skills and tackle the issues which underlie and

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[5] Project websites: http://young-adulllt-scotland.org/ and http://www.young-adulllt.eu/

[6] Following the Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013, colleges in Scotland – which provide vocational

  and non-vocational education and training at the upper secondary and tertiary level — underwent

  a regionalisation process intended to more closely align the offer of courses with the needs of the

  regional labour market, reducing their number from 43 to 26.

drive demand. We need the skills to facilitate sustainable economic growth but we also need our firms to be ambitious and demanding users of skills. (Scottish Government, 2007b, p. 13)

With the advent of the GFC, the ambitious goals of the 2007 strategy were watered down and reshaped in an updated 2010 version of the Scottish skills strategy (Scottish Government 2010b). Despite the discursive efforts to assure that the same principles of skills utilisation were governing the new strategy (Scottish Government 2010b, 5), the reality was that most of the initiatives announced in this document were directed at improving the employability of young people. While the *'skills utilisation approach'* requires long term commitments to see any improvements in the demand for skills, the *'employability approach'* offers quicker policy solutions to deal with the growing number of unemployed youth. Before the GFC, the SG skills strategy set the aim of upgrading the quality of employment and the productivity of companies but, after the crisis, the main aim of the updated skills strategy was simply to get people (i.e. young people) into employment.

The GFC diverted the SG's skills strategy from its original plans, but it also provided a perfect justification for funding cuts to adult education and the regionalisation of colleges. Just after the second electoral victory of the SNP in May 2011 (with a majority government), the SG embarked on a large scale rationalization of the colleges sector, which brought about a dramatic decrease in student numbers (McMurray 2017). Rather than being the direct result of an economic imperative, the austerity measures in the college sector were a political option taken by the SG. The political weakness of the colleges made resistance to this imposition impossible, contrasting with the success of universities in securing free tuition fees for the higher education sector. The cuts to funding for part-time courses - mainly attended by adults and women - and the prioritization of full-time courses leading to a qualification - mainly attended by young people - explain the reduction in college student numbers. The reform was justified by the savings that would be generated in public spending and the need to focus on education and training that leads to employment, particularly among young people:

Clearly there are other purposes to education, but we must recognize the difficult economic circumstances we face, with unemployment, and youth unemployment in particular, significantly higher than pre-recession levels. Moreover, we face unprecedented reductions in public expenditure. (Scottish Government, 2011b, p. 6)

Developing the Young Workforce (DYW), the SG's flagship policy for tackling youth unemployment through vocational pathways in secondary education, was launched in 2014 by the Cabinet Secretary for Fair Work, Skills and Training[7]. This strategy was the SG's response to recommendations from the *Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce* chaired by the

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[7] The Cabinet Secretary for Fair Work, Skills and Training was a position in the Scottish Government that had overall responsibility for employment policy, women's employment, youth employment, the living wage and skills and employment training. The position was abolished in May 2016, with employment issues moving to the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work, and training matters being handled by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

businessman Sir Ian Wood. Interestingly, in the creation of this commission, the SG made very clear that vocational education in Scotland, in contrast to higher education, was not of high quality and needed to be reformed (Scottish Government, 2014b, p. 4). The comparatively low levels of youth unemployment in Germanic countries during and after the recession were read by the members of the commission as an indication that a more vocationally oriented education was the best protection against youth unemployment.

Given a 19% youth unemployment rate in the first term of 2014, the target of DYW was to reduce youth unemployment by 40% (down to 11.4%) by 2021. To achieve such a target, DYW was designed as a seven-year initiative to expand the offer of vocational education and attract more students from the senior phase of secondary education to vocational routes. A change of this significance would require greater valorisation of vocational education among students and their families and greater engagement from employers in the provision of work-based learning (Scottish Government, 2014b, p. i).

The same year that DYW was launched, Education Scotland - the Executive Agency of the SG for education quality - published *Adult Learning in Scotland: Statement of Ambition* (2014). This policy document shows a completely different policy orientation to LLL from the skills strategy, the regionalisation of colleges and DYW (Britton, Schweisfurth, and Slade 2018). The focus of this document is no longer on the recovery of the economy and youth employment, but on the empowerment of individuals and communities, understanding LLL as a social right of the whole population and a tool for meeting their needs and realising their personal aspirations (Scottish Government, 2014a, p. 10). In contrast to DYW, the document did not include an implementation plan and did not led to significant material transformations of the system. The comparatively low levels of retention of this initiative seem to indicate that broad and ambitious notions of LLL are seen as desirable and 'discursively useful' but have led to few policy changes. On the other hand, the narrower economic orientation of the skills agenda has generated more focused policy reforms (e.g. regionalisation of colleges, DYW) with higher levels of retention and concrete policy changes.

Positive destinations and the employability pipeline

LLL policies for vulnerable young people in Scotland have been trying to balance various potentially contradictory imperatives and priorities. LLL policies have discursively combined an emphasis on developing the skills of the workforce to enhance economic growth with the equitable provision of education to guarantee social inclusion for vulnerable populations. The two policy orientations are potentially contradictory in the sense that they inform different definitions of the problems that LLL policies need to address (e.g. youth unemployment, social inequalities) as well as different policy solutions (e.g. employability training, widening access, community development). While Scotland's LLL policies attempt to ensure that these various objectives are complementary, their particular priorities and emphases frame the way in which policies construct and place expectations on vulnerable young adults as a target group. This tension between economic and social policy goals has been resolved by focusing on employability training and access to employment as the main policy tools to guarantee the social inclusion of vulnerable young adults.

The definition of vulnerable young people by LLL policies in Scotland has changed over the period covered by this study. Political preferences and economic circumstances have led to changes in the labels used, the definition of age groups and the level of geographical and social profiling. One constant during this period has been the policy concern for young people that do not follow traditional educational and employment routes after school. The recurrent goal of LLL policies has been to re-standardize the diversity of vulnerable young people's post-school trajectories, particularly through access to employment. These policies place importance on the individual needs and agency of their beneficiaries, but there are tensions when the same strategies are underpinned by a very narrow vision of the desirable educational and labour market trajectories necessary for young adults to flourish and for society and the economy to benefit (Heinz 2009).

The GFC provided an impetus in Scottish policy to address youth unemployment and ensure that young people had appropriate skills to improve their future opportunities and assist the economy's recovery. This meant the emergence of young adults of school-leaving age (i.e. 16-18 year olds)[8] as a priority group, particularly those deemed vulnerable and to be at risk of not achieving. This focus was already present before the GFC, evident in LLL policies such as *More Choices, More Chances* (Scottish Executive 2006), which provided a strategy to reduce the proportion of NEET young adults in Scotland. This policy was driven by the concern that Scotland had too many young people aged 15-19 who were classified as NEET (about 11% in Scotland in 2003, while the UK average was below 10% at the time[9]). In addition, the participation in education of this age group was much lower in Scotland than in other OECD countries (70% in Scotland in 2003, while the OECD average was above 80%)[10]. Underpinning this strategy was the assumption that NEET people needed more education to escape unemployment:

The young people experiencing NEET today are more likely to become the economically inactive of tomorrow. […] Given that low attainment is a characteristic of this group, it recognises that participating in education and training – rather than employment in jobs without training – is the most effective way of enabling these young people to access and sustain employment opportunities throughout their adult lives. (Scottish Executive 2006, iii)

In order to target those young people at risk of falling into the NEET category, the SG combined geographical and social profiling approaches. Seven NEET *'hotspot areas'* were identified in Scotland and sub-groups seen to be at risk of being NEET were profiled. The geographical and social profiling of youth at risk continued after 2007. However, the SG abandoned the NEET category because it was considered an inaccurate and pejorative label for young people in vulnerable situations. The new concept to identify and measure the proportion of school leavers not following desired routes was *'positive destinations'*[11].

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[8] At the age of 16, young people in Scotland can legally leave school.

[9] See Scottish Executive (2006, appendix 4).

[10] Education at a Glance, 2005.

[11] Positive destinations include higher education, further education, training, voluntary work and employment (Scottish Government, 2007a).

The positive destinations indicator has not only guided LLL policies targeting vulnerable young people, it has also been a reference point in the design of the national Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). The CfE framework, while stressing the need for a broad general education, also emphasises that it should promote young people's ability to move into positive and sustained destinations beyond school. It is notable that this framework reflects the SG desire to respond to reports from HM Inspectorate of Education (2006) and the OECD (2007) that highlighted poverty-related educational inequality and the fact that *'too many of Scotland's young people are leaving secondary education with minimal or no qualifications'* (Scottish Government 2008, 9). When referring to the senior phase of the curriculum (i.e. 16-18 year olds), the policy documents state explicitly that CfE should provide the foundation for skills development throughout life with the aim to ensure positive destinations (Scottish Government 2009). Indeed, the concern for the post-16 trajectories of school leavers is such that the positive destinations indicator became the standard for assessing the performance of the whole school system:

Curriculum for Excellence: Building the Curriculum 3 – A Framework for Learning and Teaching, makes clear the success of the education system will be judged on the extent to which it contributes to the national indicator on positive and sustained destinations. (Scottish Government 2010a, 4)

As the impact of the recession on youth unemployment reached its peak in 2011 (15.2%), the SG focus on unemployed youth intensified. Between December 2011 and May 2012 the SG appointed a Minister for Youth Employment, published its youth employment strategy and announced that it would re-direct £25 million from the European Social Funding (ESF) to youth employment initiatives (Scottish Government, 2012a, p. 19). The definition of target groups was refined over time in accordance with the shift in policy focus to meet the changing economic context. The broad definition of vulnerability as an age group (16-24 year olds) at the beginning of the youth employment crisis was gradually replaced by more socially targeted profiles as unemployment figures decreased (Scottish Government, 2014c).

A major mechanism used to enact the various strategies aimed at tackling unemployment was the *'Employability Pipeline'*, an approach intended to match appropriate services and types of provision to individuals' needs (Scottish Government 2012a). The pipeline approach implied a significant innovation in the way LLL policies addressed vulnerability as it incorporated the idea that employability interventions should not assume that all beneficiaries could immediately access employment and instead may need additional support to get ready for employment. This flexibility of the pipeline relieved some pressure from practitioners and beneficiaries but retained the goal of employment as the major mechanism of social inclusion.

While the policy objectives of economic growth and social inclusion have both been present at a discursive level in LLL policy documents, the majority of interventions targeting vulnerable youth that have been selected and retained by the SG focus on employment. Although ostensibly oriented to the individual needs of young adults, these policies are essentially designed to prepare individuals to satisfy the requirements of the economy and the labour market, ignoring the fact that many of these vulnerable populations will continue to be excluded by the market and may have unsatisfied aspirations beyond employment.

Strategic coordination, local partnerships and outcomes-based accountabilities

The SG has been putting in place several governance technologies to ensure that the different actors involved in LLL follow the policy priorities set at national level. The governance of LLL in Scotland differentiates itself from the English system through higher state involvement in the funding and coordination of the system. While in England system coordination relies mainly on market mechanisms (Keep 2015), in Scotland the government has strengthened the role of the state in centrally-managed coordination (Keep 2017). In both cases, state action has followed the same New Public Management principles (Hoggett 1996; Hood 1991) of decentralized responsibility for execution and centralized control of outcomes through monitoring and evaluation. The main difference is the greater control exercised by the national government when these outcomes-based accountabilities are combined with public provision and funding.

At the national level, LLL initiatives across the associated policy sectors in Scotland are designed to articulate with each other and to focus their actions and resources on national priorities, defined by mid- and long-term governmental strategies. These national priorities are set out in the SG's National Performance Framework[12], which provides a list of indicators to measure progress against strategic goals using an outcomes-based approach. At regional and local level, a partnership approach has guided coordination between social actors and their relationship with central government. The principles of this approach can be found in the Christie report on the Future Delivery of Public Services (Scottish Government, 2011a) and entail partners working in collaboration to facilitate better sharing of information, more effective deployment of services and resources and reductions in duplication of effort.

The tight monitoring of local actors' and partnerships' performance against national strategic targets has driven the design and implementation of different technologies in the form of public agencies and new data systems. This emphasis on data use for accountability purposes has two main dimensions. Firstly, a move towards more systematic and co-ordinated collection and use of data on levels of participation in education, training and employment, associated variables and contextual data to inform labour market, education and skills strategies at local and national level. Perhaps the clearest example of this has been the development of Regional Skills Assessments (RSAs) by Skills Development Scotland (SDS). These are constructed from various sources at local authority level and involve collaboration across Scottish Enterprise, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and the Scottish Local Authorities Economic Development (SLAED) Group. These RSAs provide a 'single, agreed evidence base' that are intended to inform strategies to promote skills development[13].

Secondly, there has been an increase in the collection and use of data on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to support progress monitoring by national agencies of policy-related actions and activities at local and regional level. The use of Outcomes Agreements (OAs) by the SFC in the funding of

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[12] Frequently updated at http://nationalperformance.gov.scot

[13] https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/skills-planning/regional-skills-assessments/

colleges and universities is a paradigmatic case. For example, each college has an OA that sets out what the college plans to deliver in return for funding from SFC and, in doing so, the colleges must reflect local, regional and national policy priorities that include improving life chances, widening access and contributing to sustainable economic growth. Both forms of data use have increasingly become part of the fabric of public policy since the SNP's arrival in power.

The economic orientation of the skills agenda has shaped the type of partnerships promoted by LLL policies, reaching beyond traditional educational actors. The focus on youth unemployment as the main policy problem, and the selection of policy solutions that imply a greater vocational orientation of the curriculum and higher participation in apprenticeships, necessarily required a greater involvement of employers in these partnerships. The policies adopted during this period placed an emphasis on partnerships between education/training providers and employers, aiming to strengthen the routes for young people from education into employment. A good example of this approach is DYW, which aims to expand the attractiveness of work-based learning and is implemented by regional and local partnerships with employers' representatives playing a leading role:

The key challenges for colleges lie in developing more productive partnerships with local authorities, schools and with employers, and to understand how these improve learner experiences and outcomes.
(Scottish Government, 2014b, p. 15)

The SG has been trying to apply the same model of outcomes-based accountabilities that has been used with local governments and public providers to the DYW partnerships with employers. In its seven-year programme of work, clear responsibilities and targets are allocated to the partners involved in its implementation, with a timeline of actions, expected outcomes and reporting mechanisms. The actual level of involvement and commitment of employers and companies in the implementation of this initiative will be key to assessing the effectiveness of such an approach, but it seems clear that the incentives for employers to follow these political directions will be less powerful than in the case of colleges and local authorities. This outcomes-based accountability has proven effective for governing the behaviour of public bodies (e.g. colleges, local councils) and steering them in the directions set at central level, but it may have serious limitations when applied to partnerships with employers and the business sector.

Conclusions

The political management of the GFC by the SG has reinforced the instrumental and economic orientation of LLL policies under the skills for work agenda. Youth unemployment has been prioritised as the main social problem to be addressed, and most of the limited public resources for LLL have been targeted at youth at risk of unemployment at the expense of broader adult education. SNP governments have taken advantage of the political opportunity offered by the GFC to strengthen the labour market orientation of education provision and impose stringent austerity measures on colleges with little political resistance.

The skills strategy of the SG has displaced the holistic goals of learning that were emphasized in the Scottish LLL strategy of the 2000s. Human development and social justice perspectives on LLL vindicated by adult education policy have remained mere rhetorical ambitions with low political

retention. The notion of LLL as a social right of individuals and communities is seen as desirable and 'discursively useful' but has led to few concrete policy changes to ensure that these rights are delivered. On the other hand, the narrower economic orientation of skills strategies has provided the framework for concrete policy reforms that have restructured college provision, expanded the offer of apprenticeships and created vocational pathways in secondary education.

While the policy objectives of economic growth and social inclusion have both been present at a discursive level in LLL policy documents, the majority of interventions targeting vulnerable youth that have been selected and retained by the SG focus on employment. Under a framework of efficiency driven reforms, the equity aims of LLL policies have been limited to targeted interventions for certain disadvantaged social profiles and geographical locations without proper engagement with the structural causes of disadvantage. The difficult equilibrium between the economic and social goals of LLL has been resolved by focusing on employability training and access to employment as the main policy tools to guarantee the social inclusion of vulnerable young adults. While definitions of vulnerability and target groups have tried to take into account the different personal circumstances and sources of disadvantage among young people, the focus on employability and measurable outcomes has reduced the scope for beneficiaries to define and realise their own desired trajectories and life projects.

These policy priorities have been set and articulated through national strategies and targets but responsibility for their effective execution has been transferred to local actors and partnerships. This transfer of responsibilities has been accompanied by the adoption of new governance technologies of control in the form of national agencies and new data systems. Tight performance monitoring against national strategic targets has configured a model of outcomes-based accountabilities that is applied to both public, voluntary and private actors. While this model has resulted in greater capacity of the central government to steer the behaviour of local authorities and public providers, it is less clear to what extent this will effectively involve employers in the skill formation of young people.

Home international comparisons between the Scottish case and the other UK countries should open opportunities for policy learning in LLL (Hodgson and Spours 2019). The converging trend across the four nations focusing on skills for work agenda suggests that these policy orientations were not episodic responses to a particular economic context but the result of wider policy shifts. Likewise, divergences in their policy trajectories and associated mechanisms are a good indication of the political character of policy decisions and the possibilities for change. This is especially interesting in the case of Scotland and its purposive differentiation from the market model of skill formation in England (Gallacher and Reeve 2019). The Scottish reforms and associated SG policy architecture is distinct from the other UK countries in its centralism motivated by political control and accountability of actors at all levels to ensure delivery of the policy objectives. This is an interesting paradox when one considers that the SG prides itself on its consultative stance regarding policy development. Transforming these agendas, structures and social practices necessarily requires their de-naturalization as well as recognition of the ideological and selective character of the political decisions behind these LLL policies.

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