

What can we learn from cross-national comparisons of education and training?

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Introduction

What can we learn from cross-national comparisons of education and training?

- Focus on policy/practice development rather than other purposes of comparison
- Policy borrowing v policy learning
- ‘Sociology’ v ‘science’ of policy learning (policy-maker as subject or audience of research)

Overview

1. Comparative research on 'transition systems' – institutional factors shaping education-work transitions
2. Comparative research on National Qualifications Frameworks
3. Policy learning from cross-national comparisons – 4 strategies

1. Transition systems

- Starting point
 - Processes and outcomes of education-work transitions vary across countries
 - Country differences persist despite ‘global’ pressures
 - ... and are explained in terms of institutional differences which create different national ‘logics’ ...
 - ... which mean that ‘global’ pressures affect countries in different ways (so do not produce convergence)
 - Similarly, the ‘same’ policy may have different impacts
 - Explanatory frameworks focus on different features of ‘transition systems’ ...

Transition systems: explanatory frameworks

Focus on ...

1. Education and training (ET) systems

- Key dimensions of variation: stratification, standardisation (Allmendinger 1989), vocational specificity, scale of HE (Shavit & Müller 1998)
- General idea: where ET systems channel, socialise and label young people in ways which match their LM destinations, transitions are smoother, faster, more predictable and involve fewer job changes

Transition systems: explanatory frameworks

Focus on ...

2. Labour-market (LM) structure

- Key dimension of variation: occupational v internal labour markets (OLMs v ILMs) (Müller & Gangl 2003)
- General idea: where OLMs dominate, young people's entry is based on specific qualifications rather than general potential; integration is faster, more predictable but with less mobility

Transition systems: explanatory frameworks

Focus on ...

3. ET-LM linkages

- Key dimensions of variation: nature of linkages between ET and LM (Hannan et al. 1996); type of institutional network (Rosenbaum et al. 1990)
- General idea: communications between ET and LM (about LM demands, opportunities, programmes and qualifications, individual YP etc) influence speed, predictability and outcomes of transitions

The 3 frameworks may combine to form a typology of transition systems (eg Kerckhoff 2000) ...

<i>Type of transition system:</i>	<i>Type 1</i>	<i>Type 2</i>
Institutional features		
ET System	Standardized Stratified Focus on occupationally specific skills	Less standardized Comprehensive, weak tracking Focus on general skills and employability
Dominant LMs	Occupational	Internal
ET-LM linkages	Strong	Weak
Transition processes and outcomes		
LM integration	Rapid	Slow
Unemployment risk	Low	High
Pathways	Predictable, hard to change direction	Flexible
Level of LM entry	Higher, based on skill	Lower, based on potential
Occupational and Career Mobility	Low	High
Correlation between ET and LM destination	Stronger	Weaker

Transition systems: explanatory frameworks

Focus on ...

4. Welfare regimes

- Applying social-welfare typologies (Esping-Anderson 1990, Buchholz et al. 2009):
 - Social-democratic/universalistic
 - Employment-oriented
 - Liberal
 - Family-oriented
 - Post-socialist
- General idea: values and assumptions underpinning institutions and policies are reflected in transition patterns and outcomes

Transition systems: empirical evidence

- Do transitions differ across countries in ways predicted by explanations?
 - Methodological issues: number and range of countries
 - Evidence to support each explanation ... but not to choose among them
 - As number and range of countries increase, so does number of explanatory dimensions, eg
 - LM regulation
 - Family structure
 - Role of informal and family economy
 - Intermediary structures (eg IAG) (Huitfeldt 2008)

Transition systems: empirical evidence

- Typologies – explain some variation but
 - Work less well with more/more diverse countries
 - Not robust: different assumptions, methods, etc produce different typologies
 - Countries vary within type
- ‘Multi-dimensional approach’ (OECD 2000)
 - Dimensions: standardisation, stratification, OLM/ILM etc ...
 - Combine differently to produce country-specific ‘logics’ ...
 - ... which typologies illuminate as ‘ideal types’ but not as empirical representations

2. National Qualifications Frameworks

A qualifications framework is an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved.... The scope of frameworks may be comprehensive of all learning achievement and pathways or may be confined to a particular sector.... Some frameworks may have more design elements and a tighter structure than others; some may have a legal basis whereas others represent a consensus of views of social partners. All qualifications frameworks, however, establish a basis for improving the quality, accessibility, linkages and public or labour market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally
(OECD 2007)

National Qualifications Frameworks

- International spread of NQFs (70+) ...
- Reflects policy borrowing based on
 - Largely superficial and uncritical literature
 - Limited (and contested) evidence on impact
 - Influence of (unrepresentative) anglophone ‘first-generation’ NQFs
 - Influence of international organisations, donors, etc
- Superficial similarities mask differences: in context, purpose, design, process
- ILO study of NQFs: Implementation and Impact (based on update of literature + 18 case studies)
- Following based on contribution to Young et al. (2009)

National Qualifications Frameworks

- NQFs are controversial. Issues include:
 - Learning outcomes
 - Purposes of NQFs: role of qualifications as instrument of educational (and wider) change
 - Policy breadth
 - Comprehensive NQFs as integrating devices
 - Implementation strategies
- ... all coloured by cross-national differences
- ... and role of QFs as 'translation' device (EQF rationale) based on conjecture rather than experience (so far)
- A focus on NQFs as dynamic entities could lead to the following typology (based on Allais 2007)...

A typology of NQFs

<i>Type of NQF:</i>	Communications	Reforming	Transformational
<i>Starting point</i>	Existing ET system	Existing ET system	Future ET system
<i>Purpose:</i>	To increase transparency; To provide tool for rationalising system, increasing coherence, facilitating access transfer and progression	To achieve specific reforms eg fill gaps, enhance quality, extend access transfer and progression; To provide tool for rationalising system, increasing coherence	To transform ET and lead development of new system
<i>Design</i>	Loose, varies across sub-frameworks	Tighter, but varies across sub-frameworks	Tight, central specification imposed more uniformly
<i>Leadership and control</i>	Voluntary, 'Bottom up' ET institutions share leadership Substantial decision-making at level of sub-framework	Compulsory 'Top-down': led by central agency/govt ET institutions as key partners Control may vary across sub-frameworks	Compulsory 'Top down': led by central agency/govt ET institutions among partners Centralised control
<i>Expected role in change</i>	Tool for change: requires complementary drivers to ensure tool is used	Drives specific changes; requires complementary drivers for other impacts	Expected to drive transformation of system

Typology of NQFs

- Examples, among older NQFs:
 - Communications: Scotland
 - Reforming: Ireland
 - Transformational: New Zealand (mark 1), South Africa (mark 1)
- Scottish and Irish (Communications and Reforming) NQFs appear to be most 'successful'
- (... assuming we can define and measure success)
- Both have starting point in existing ET system
- ... so does success depend on the model of change which guides the introduction of an NQF?

A normative model of change

(Based mainly on 1st-generation NQFs)

- Starting point: the process of introducing an NQF is social and political as well as technical. It involves:
 - Maintaining/building trust
 - Aligning ‘intrinsic logic’ of NQF with ‘institutional logic’ of ET and LM
 - Diffusing new ‘language’ of NQF
 - Cultural change
 - Accommodating/reconciling stakeholder interests

A normative model of change (cont.)

To introduce an effective NQF therefore requires:

1. Time: for cultural change, to establish trust, learn language (need to manage expectations)
2. Stakeholder involvement and partnership: to populate NQF, change institutional logics, ensure deep implementation
3. Effective mechanisms for coordination
4. Loose but variable design (typically using sub-frameworks to resolve tension between tightness and scope)

A normative model of change (cont.)

To introduce an effective NQF requires:

5. A process of iterative alignment (of NQF and practice, intrinsic and institutional logics)
 6. Balance of development within sub-frameworks and integration across them
 7. Policy breadth (complementary policies/drivers to change institutional logics)
- .. i.e. an incremental process of change starting from the existing ET system

Can the 'normative model' apply to other countries?

- Based on 1st-generation NQFs
- Later NQFs are introduced in different contexts: non-anglophone ET traditions, political cultures, levels of economic development, types of LM, resource levels, etc
- But do these differences affect validity of
 - Starting assumptions: need for trust, alignment of logics, language, cultural change, stakeholder interests
 - The model of incremental change based on these assumptions?
- Should the model be seen as
 - Prescriptive ('best practice')
 - Or an 'ideal type' to stimulate and inform policy learning within countries
 - (And can it be either of these for countries which lack the starting point assumed by an incremental mode of change?)

3. Policy learning from cross-national comparisons: 4 strategies

1. 'Policy borrowing': identifying transferable best practice
2. 'Keeping it in the family': focus on 'similar' countries
3. Identifying generic conditions of success
4. Comparisons as heuristic (informing policy learning within a country)

Strategy 1: Policy borrowing

Approach

- Compare policies/institutions to find out ‘what works’ (best)

Examples

- Finland (post-PISA)
- Apprenticeship, ‘successful’ transition measures
- NQFs in general, and particular models (eg NZ unit standards)

Issues

- Transfer across different contexts/system logics
- Focus on new policies – less evidence on impact (eg NQFs, OECD 2007)
- Choice of countries (politics and convenience v science; choice too narrowly focused on ‘successful’ countries)
- Widely criticised – but really a matter of degree?

Strategy 2: Keeping it in the family

Approach

- Compare systems with similar ‘logics’ to improve chances of policy transfer

Examples

- ‘Home international’ comparisons (eg Croxford & Raffe 2007)
- NQF policy borrowing among anglophone countries, and among similar (eg smaller) anglophone countries
- Policy sharing within regional blocs (eg EU) and families within blocs

Issues

- Who’s in the family? Typologies are not robust
- Variability within types – national uniqueness
- Small sample numbers: problem of inference

Strategy 3: Identifying generic conditions of success

Approach

- Identify ‘best practice’ at more abstract level than specific policy or institution

Examples

- ‘Normative model of change’ for NQFs (above)
- Six ‘key ingredients of successful transition systems’ (OECD 2000)
- Competence and Competition (1984) and more recent policy comparisons

Issues

- Methodology for identifying generic conditions (influenced by prevailing policy discourses?)
- Why hasn’t research been more cumulative?
- Conditions often vague or circular (better as heuristic aids to policy thinking than as precise prescription?)

Strategy 4: Comparisons as heuristic

Approach

- Use comparisons to inform analysis of own system and policy options: conceptual and analytical frameworks, ideal types, etc

Examples

- Broadfoot (2000) ‘make the familiar strange’
- ETF approach to policy learning in NQFs?
- ILO project on NQFs?
- OECD ‘multi-dimensional’ approach to transition systems?

Issues

- How do we know that a conceptual and analytical framework is transferable?
- Policy-makers’ expectations
- Assumes capacity, disposition and time for policy learning within country

Final comments

- Variety of policy purposes for comparison in addition to policy development, eg
 - Benchmark performance
 - Identify global trends and pressures
 - Understand limits to national autonomy
 - Inform multi- or trans-national activity
- Issues reflect sociology as well as science of policy learning
- In practice, comparisons reflect mix of these (and other) strategies – but need to be more self-aware about methodology for policy learning