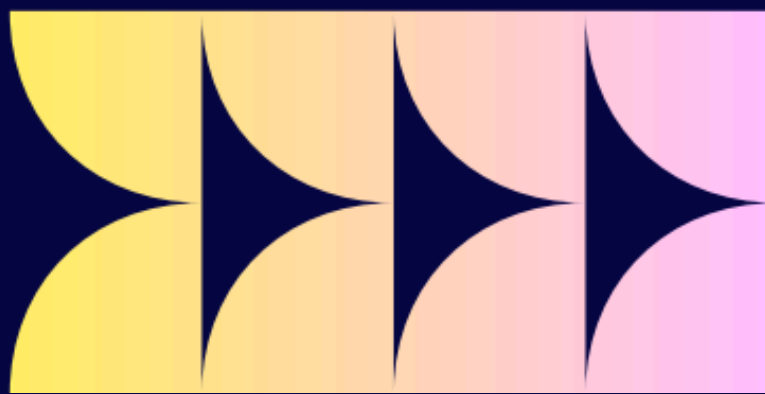




Cross-nation Policy Learning Series: Scotland Roundtable Report



PolicyWISE



Overview

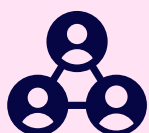
In May 2024, PolicyWISE convened a roundtable in Edinburgh to examine cross-nation policy learning best practice and challenges over last 25 years, and to look forward to improved comparative policy research and knowledge exchange.

The event brought together senior policymakers, analysts, academics, think-tank colleagues, education leaders, inter-governmental officials, and economists – from across Scotland, and beyond.

This was the first in a series of roundtables across the nations, with events in Wales, Northern Ireland, and England to follow through 2024 - 25.

Our aims in hosting this roundtable, and the series, is to help inform and improve how policy learning and development works across nations and administrations, how comparative policy research, data and researchers can contribute, and the use and development of cross-nation networks and communities.

Some key roundtable takeaways included:



The challenge for policymakers, think-tanks, and researchers to move from being “devolution aware” to “devolution able.”



The importance of data comparability, whilst recognising policy and nation difference.



The need for multi-lateral leaning – avoiding both “Anglophobia” and England as the “norm.”

The key themes that emerged from the roundtable were:

1. Policy priorities: divergence, learning and comparability.

Participants were clear that devolution had allowed Scotland to make important policy decisions, diverging from elsewhere in the UK where necessary based on national need, context, and values.

What is less clear is what conditions initiated or enabled separation, and whether policy learning has occurred between Scotland and the other nations as a result. We discussed whether:

A fundamentally different philosophical approaches to (for example) higher education policy has developed a sense of Scottish “exceptionalism,” where cross-nation policy learning is seen as not relevant or not needed?

Is a (perceived) lack of cross-nation policy networks a barrier to knowledge exchange?

Has the recent political culture in Westminster, as compared to the first decade and a half of devolution, made cross-nation policy learning more difficult? Discussion at the roundtable noted that new and innovative policies reduces of the power imbalances that can otherwise stifle policy learning from the devolved contexts.

2. Data comparability and coherence

The challenge of improving data comparability and coherence across the nations was the topic of much discussion. There was consensus on the potential of better data comparability to improve evidence and policymaking.

A lack of data availability, including comparable data, is a barrier to cross-context policy learning, and therefore to policy-development. However, participants felt strongly that the distinctiveness and needs of each nation should not be undermined by greater comparability.

To ensure that the comparison of data is possible, this needs to be a consideration during the design of collection methods. Attempting to compare different datasets retrospectively is problematic.

International comparison of data provides a good example of how to navigate differences in policies or statistical measures and still achieve comparability. It is therefore valuable to also look for comparators beyond the UK, especially since leaving Eurostat.

3. Cross-nation learning – structures, mechanisms, and culture

Bringing policymakers together with academic researchers and think-tanks encouraged a lively discussion on policy learning structures, networks, and mechanisms.

There was a strong sense of self-reflection amongst think-tank and research institute colleagues. They shared the challenges of limited capability and capacity to understand, analyse and research in a genuinely comparative way.

The “academic” understanding that policies are different and developed in different ways across the UK has grown, but the “practical” understanding of what this means is less developed.

It was suggested that the main UK Government devolution and inter-governmental unit should move (back) to the UK Government Cabinet Office to further support respect and relations.

It is felt that some UK Government departments are very good at understanding their “England” roles, whilst others mix their UK and England roles without being clear in their communication or relations with other governments, media or wider public.



Roundtable Takeaways

Think-tanks and research community can do more to support cross-nation learning and analysis.

Improved capacity and capability for cross-nation policy learning is not only important for governments and parliaments. Think-tanks and research centres in Scotland should create and identify opportunities to work with others, in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK, to enhance knowledge and understanding of policy divergence and differences.

This could provide greater comparative policy research capability, address the perceived Anglo-centricity of “UK” institutions, and benefit policymakers in Scotland and elsewhere in the UK.

Importance of data comparability but need to recognise difference.

There was consensus on the importance of data comparability across nations to support policy learning, analysis, and comparative research. However, this should not be at the expense of devolved policy priorities and context, and comparability is not the same as each nation and administrations using the exact same definitions, measures, or outputs. Both UK-wide and international comparability and measures are important.

Moving from devolution-aware to devolution-able.

The next stage of improved “devolution capability”, for researchers and policymakers alike, is to move on from understanding the concept of devolved powers and institutions to recognising it as a valued model for learning about policy differences.

Devolution also allows for fresh approaches to policy challenges and increased knowledge exchange. Training for researchers and policymakers to “think comparatively” would help with this.

Multi-lateral learning – avoiding both “Anglophobia” and England as the “norm.”

There is a two-fold risk of Scottish researchers and policymakers avoiding knowledge exchange with English policy (seen as not relevant or a different political culture) and therefore missing out on potential policy learning; and a view amongst ‘UK’ policymakers and researchers that English policy is the default.

It is important that devolved policy is understood (and analysed) as policy that has been created in its own distinct way, for its own context. It is rarely developed solely as a “response” to, or as a version of, policy elsewhere.

The roundtable was conducted under the Chatham House rule. This report of the key points is anonymized and unattributed. A full report of the event will be available soon.





PolicyWISE

Our focus and way of working makes us unique:

1. **Space:** We create and maintain neutral but constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to **develop relationships, respect and knowledge.**
2. **Sharing:** We develop and support a common culture of sharing and developing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.
3. **Solutions:** We help governments focus on evidence-informed policy solutions for citizens and communities across the nations, informed by comparative and collaborative research and methods.

Our offer

PolicyWISE works cross-nation on comparative research and knowledge exchange which will change and improve how governments and academics work together in and across nations to solve policy challenges.

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We work at pace to support policy analysis, development, and consideration.

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We are a partner of choice for collaborative and comparative projects, and we work across The Open University's four nations.

Wise in 5

The only regular snapshot comparative guide to public policy issues across the nations of the UK and Ireland.

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