



PolicyWISE

Cross-nation Policy Learning and Research Series: Scotland Roundtable Full Report

Introduction & Overview

In May 2024, [PolicyWISE](#) convened a roundtable in Edinburgh to examine cross-nation policy learning best practice and challenges over last 25 years.

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

The discussion reflected on the devolution era so far and looked forward to improved comparative policy research and knowledge exchange across nations and administrations. A summary report of the roundtable is also available on the PolicyWISE website.

This was the first in a series of roundtables across the nations. **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.
- Comparative policy research and researchers can contribute to evidence-informed approaches to challenges.
- Better use of existing, and new, networks, structures and communities for cross-nation policy learning and development.
- Policymakers and researchers understand and use data, within a comparative context.
- Identification of common challenges and issues across nations, whilst supporting nation-specific responses.



Some key themes that emerged from this roundtable were:

1. Policy priorities: divergence, learning and comparability.

2. Data comparability and coherence.

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

Our roundtable takeaways were:



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



Importance of data comparability, while recognising difference.



The challenge of moving from devolution-aware to devolution-able.



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

Policy priorities: divergence, learning and comparability.

During the first 25 years of devolution, the policy priorities of all the UK nations have understandably diverged. Although this may have been accelerated by increasing political differences between the nations, **policy divergence has been evident from the beginning.** The roundtable examined several areas where policymaking in Scotland has differed from the rest of the UK, led the way, or stood its ground in recent years.

One area of significant divergence is Higher Education policy. The abolition of tuition fees in 2000 marked a notable shift for Scotland from the rest of the UK, where tuition fees have continued to rise. The Fresh Talent scheme, despite operating in a reserved area, allowed international students to remain in Scotland after their studies with agreement from the UK Government.

Despite these advancements, there remained disappointment among some participants that less progress had been made in providing support for part-time students or in maintenance support, both of which are barriers to those wanting to access higher education. Such changes were considered to have transformed HE policy in Wales but were perhaps too expensive for Scotland.

Scotland has been recognised as leading on policy changes such as the repeal of Section 28, the smoking ban and free personal care for the elderly. It was suggested that the smoking in public places ban faced opposition from Westminster policymakers at the time of Scottish policy development, but it went on to influence the UK Government's (and others) approach.

More recently, the introduction of Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) for Alcohol in 2018 was labelled a 'world first'. The policy was introduced following worrying figures around alcohol-related deaths in Scotland and sets a 50p minimum price per unit. The policy received significant challenge from industry, but to allay concerns, a 'sunset clause' was added, meaning the policy would expire in 2024 to give opportunity for review. Substantial evaluation has taken place to examine the effect on consumers, industry, and health.

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.

Some questions under discussion include:

- Have the fundamentally different philosophical approaches to (for example) higher education policy developed a **Scottish “exceptionalism”**, where policy learning is seen as not relevant or not needed?
- Or is a (perceived) **lack of cross-nation policy networks** a greater barrier to knowledge exchange?
- Or perhaps the **prevailing recent political culture** in Westminster, as compared to the first decade and a half of devolution, has made policy learning more difficult?

The introduction of MUP, and the substantial evaluation that is being undertaken, presents a clear opportunity for policy learning. This is an example of Scotland leading the way in policy formulation and in knowledge and understanding of outcomes. Discussion at the roundtable noted that as a new and innovative policy this led to mitigation of the power imbalances that can otherwise stifle policy learning from the devolved contexts. It was agreed however, that the Internal Markets Act (introduced in 2020 to ‘make provision in connection with the internal market for goods and services in the United Kingdom’) has added a layer of complexity and uncertainty to devolved decision making in areas such as MUP.



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.**

There was optimism around the current development of statistics and data expertise and capability in Scotland and Scottish Government. The Scottish Census and National Performance Framework (NPF) are examples of large-scale studies or measurements that provide valuable Scotland-specific insights and information. However, the latest Census exercise has highlighted challenges in data creation in Scotland, in relation to response rates, frequency of collection and coherence with other datasets. The development of the NPF would also benefit from further appraisal.

Administrative data sources and organisations across the UK can support one another to improve the quality and comparability of data, through **planning, design, and mutual understanding.**

Participants were encouraged by a general shift towards an improved understanding of devolution in organisations such as the Office for National Statistics (ONS), good working relationships between the ONS and statisticians in the Scottish Government and increasing learning between colleagues across governments.

For example, Scotland was able to pull on other datasets from the UK to mitigate for some of the limitations of its most recent Census exercise. However, to extend mutual support most effectively, quality administrative **data needs to be collected at every level of governance** – local, regional, devolved and national – and shared with researchers for use and analysis.

Discussions identified several further considerations for increasing data comparability in the UK:

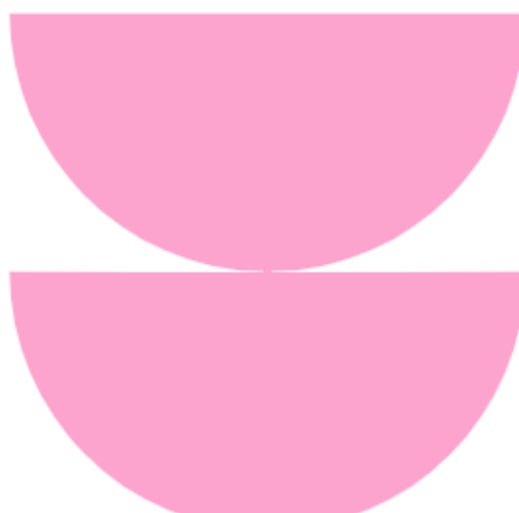
- The starting point for data and statistics in government is how it can be used to inform policymaking. Where the implications and use of data is similar across nations, there is scope for comparability.
- To ensure that the comparison of data is possible, this needs to be a **consideration during the design** of collection methods. Attempting to compare different datasets retrospectively is problematic.
- The **definition of policy challenges, solutions and the data** that informs them can vary from nation to nation, often necessarily so.

‘Green jobs’ is a prime example where all nations want to monitor, compare and collaborate on progress in this area, but differing policy landscapes may mean that it is not possible to always compare like for like. Scotland’s wind industry is distinct from the rest of the UK in its scope and importance to ambitions around green jobs.

Other policy areas, such as Education, have long-rooted differences in systems and structures. Comparability in this area is **difficult, nuanced, and political**. Learning around devolution in organisations such as ONS is leading to a better appreciation of what data can, and cannot, be mirrored across the nations, and where UK/English data should not be used as the default measure.

Despite the need for appraisal, examples such as the National Performance Framework (NPF) are tied to key policies and needs related to the Scottish context. Adapting the indicators included simply to improve comparability **could undermine its significance** to Scotland.

- **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.



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. Attendees took the opportunity to move beyond a narrow focus on inter-governmental and inter-parliamentary structures.

In a wider discussion on devolution knowledge, many felt that ‘four nations’ or devolution considerations aren’t thought about early enough in the policymaking or evidence process. The “academic” understanding that policies are different and developed in different ways has grown, but the **“practical” understanding of what this means is less developed**. It needs to be “baked in” right at the start – in all governments – not as a “bolt on” in consultations, policy papers and evidence gathering.

Discussions included a sense of **“reticence” to learn from, or have strong knowledge exchange with, English policy and research**. Colleagues mentioned the challenges of different political cultures, whether England was too “big” and English regions might be more comparable, and questioning whether “England” policymakers see themselves as responsible for England rather than the UK?

This could enhance analysis from London-based organisations that claim to be UK/GB-wide, but also support greater comparative knowledge, relationships and understanding between the four UK nations.

Some felt that the policy and research community in Scotland hadn’t been taking enough notice of developments in Wales and Northern Ireland. The example of the recent Welsh Constitutional Commission was highlighted. “We need to be better at talking to each other” was recommended, as well as the relationship with Westminster, and that networks and structures to do this need to be developed.

It was also highlighted, however, that asymmetric devolution means that the development of **different infrastructure and institutions poses a challenge on cross-nation learning** and comparative work. There are Scottish bodies and organisations, when the equivalent might not exist for Wales and Northern Ireland – or they are organised on an ‘England and Wales’ basis.

Moving onto policy, governmental and parliamentary networks and structures, discussion covered whether the main devolution unit and team within the UK Government **should be moved (back) to the UK Government Cabinet Office**. Colleagues suggested that this would be advantageous for the position and knowledge of inter-governmental relations, across governments. It was suggested that this move could further support the development of relationships that supported respect and policy learning/knowledge exchange

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policymakers see themselves as responsible for England rather than the UK?

This latter point echoes points made at our ‘Economics Devolution’ conference. 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.

Colleagues felt that the roundtable had **achieved something new and different in bringing a diverse and wide range** of people from government, policy, research, and think-tanks together. The issue of **training for policymakers, and those who keep policymakers accountable** (i.e., researchers and parliamentary staff), to **“think comparatively”** was raised in this context. It was suggested that parliaments could work together on this, and with those from the research and policy world who could help develop this capability and capacity.

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.

► **Move 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.



PolicyWISE Cross–Nation Policy Learning Roundtables

Through a unique comparative policy and knowledge exchange approach – creating cross-nation space and a common culture of sharing – PolicyWISE brings people and research together to help find solutions to issues facing all policymakers.

All our work is UK and Ireland by design, supporting policymakers and researchers across the nations to develop relationships, respect, and knowledge. We do this through our distinctive [Wise in 5 briefings](#), events such as our recent [Economic Devolution conference](#), our policy cluster programme, our developing [Mind Your Policy Language tool](#), and monthly newsletter.

During 2024 and 2025 we are hosting a series of roundtables to examine cross-nation policy learning best practice and challenges over last 25 years. In reflecting on the devolution era so far, we hope to also look forward to improved comparative policy research and knowledge exchange across nations and administrations.

All the roundtables are conducted under the Chatham House rule. This report of the key points is anonymized and unattributed. It pulls together key findings from discussions, identifies key insights and perspectives, highlights opportunities and challenges, and provides some recommendations for cross-nation policy learning and development.

This report was authored by Dr Eira Jepson, with support from Dewi Knight and Catherine May, all of PolicyWISE.





PolicyWISE

Our focus and ways 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.

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Utilising our distinct focus and skills we deliver impactful and dynamic training for any audience interested in learning how a comparative policy analysis and knowledge exchange can benefit their work.

Dewi Knight, Director



Our funder

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