



**UNIVERSITY OF  
STIRLING**

**The Future of Adult Learning and  
Social Cohesion in Scotland**

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## Introduction

Governments across the world are actively interested in promoting lifelong learning. The language and concept are dominant in the European Commission's policies for education and training, reflecting the pervasive belief among the EU's member states in the importance of continual learning, across a variety of institutional contexts, in enabling people, enterprises and communities to adapt and thrive in a challenging, highly competitive and dynamic global marketplace (European Commission 2001). By 2000, the EC and OECD had both concluded that lifelong learning is not simply as a desirable policy goal in its own right, but should provide an overarching framework within which all educational policy should be developed (Schemmann 2007, 77-8 and 125-9).

These developments mark an important shift in policy, first in emphasising the importance of continual learning right across and throughout the life span; and second, in placing such lifelong (and lifewide learning) at the centre of the entire education and skills system. In September 2007, shortly after entering office, the newly-elected Scottish Government published a skills strategy that, in Fiona Hyslop's words, "sets out what our objectives need to be to develop a cohesive lifelong learning system centred upon the individual but responsive to employer needs". This is presented against the background of the Government's wider goal of building "a Scotland that is wealthier and fairer, one that is healthier, safer, stronger and greener" (Scottish Government 2007, 2). This paper seeks to contribute to the debate on the future role of adult learning in promoting social cohesion in Scotland. The analysis is in four parts: first, I summarise the findings of recent research into the relationship between lifelong learning and social cohesion; second, I assess levels of participation in adult learning in Scotland; third, I then consider issues of equity and cohesion in participation in adult learning; I then examine the extent to which our existing lifelong learning system is placed to contribute to social cohesion in the future. On this occasion, I say little about the 'supply side', as a number of other speakers will talk about the role of the various major providers.

## 1. Social cohesion and lifelong learning

The debate over education and social cohesion is an old one, dating back well into the nineteenth century and before. The education system that had been developed by the middle of the twentieth century was strongly shaped by two important traditions of thought. First, particularly in the nineteenth century, many people believed that a common schooling helped to strengthen national solidarity, while more selective schooling structures tended to perpetuate divisions (Green 1990). Second, twentieth century advocates of mass education argued that education played a significant role in social integration, helping to overcome tensions between the classes and allowing social mobility. As Anthony Cooke has shown in his authoritative study of adult education in Scotland, such views helped to form adult education movements as well as school systems (Cooke 2006). They are also expressed very clearly in the European Commission's *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, which not only identifies social cohesion as a major objective of education and training, but goes further to urge that all levels of the education system should promote active citizenship and positive tolerance of diversity (European Commission 2001).

Recent research supports these clear and positive policy statements on the impact of lifelong learning and social cohesion. Without wandering too far down the path of definitions, we can distinguish between a number of different elements that are relevant to an assessment of social cohesion.

Social capital is one. We can think of a cohesive society as one in which a wide range of citizens engage in social movements of various kinds and have ties with one another. Research into the impact of adult learning on active citizenship is of long standing. Case studies and cross sectional surveys have both provided support for the view that adult learning and active citizenship are positively related, though they do not shed much light on causality (this evidence is summarised in Field 2005). Participation in learning tends to

enhance social capital, by helping develop social competences, extending social networks, and promoting shared norms and tolerance of others (Schuller et al 2004). A survey of over 600 literacy and numeracy learners in Scotland over time showed significant increases in the proportion going out regularly among females and older people; greater clarity about future intentions on community involvement; and a rise in the number who could identify someone they could turn to for help (Tett and Maclachlan 2007, 154-7).

Second, cohesion in an active sense requires high levels of self-efficacy. The most consistent finding in qualitative research and practitioner narratives is that adult learning produces gains in confidence (Knasel, Meed and Rossetti 2000; Tett and Maclachlan 2007, 159). A detailed qualitative investigation of adult literacy, numeracy and host language education in England found that participants identified both social confidence and personal confidence among the most highly valued outcomes of courses (Barton et al 2007, 111). Additionally, Hammond and Feinstein's longitudinal analysis (2006) found that learners were more likely to report gains in self-efficacy and sense of agency (perceived control over important life choices) than non-learners.

Third, social cohesion can imply a degree of social equality, including relative equality in access to adult learning. Researchers have examined the relationship between schooling and social stratification in great depth, with varying results. It is widely accepted that initial education – school and university – has in the past helped to create and reinforce socio-economic inequalities, and left-of-centre education policy measures, such as comprehensive schools systems, have usually been designed to counter this well-established tendency. Whether such measures have in fact reduced social inequality is not entirely clear. Recent studies by Lindsay Paterson and Christina Ianelli pose a number of awkward challenges to any easy assumptions about comprehensive education and socio-economic inequalities (Paterson and Ianelli 2007). Extrapolating from this work to the post-compulsory sector, it is equally possible that adult learning may also give rise to and reinforce inequalities, rather than helping reduce them.

On this question, the best evidence to date comes from comparative international studies. In a detailed and thorough study of a range of nations, Andy Green and colleagues have analysed a wide variety of data on education and inequality. They used data from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) to examine 'skills dispersal' in the adult population, finding that the nations with the greatest skills inequality on the IALS measures for literacy and numeracy were the Nordic nations; those with the greatest levels of equality were the USA and UK, though they noted that in both of the latter cases there was likely to be a marked impact from past immigration (Green, Preston and Janmaat 2006, 120-21). They also noted that the Nordic countries not only showed relatively low variations between top and bottom groups in the population, but were also characterised by high overall performance on all three of the IALS measures. Other researchers have noted that the Nordic nations all show high overall levels of participation in adult learning (Rubenson 2006; Milana and Desjardins 2007), while analyses of the PISA data for schoolchildren show a similar combination of high overall performance on the one hand with a relatively narrow distribution between top and bottom. In the Nordic cases, then, lifelong learning appears to promote social cohesion, but is able to do so because of a relatively egalitarian and high-performing system of initial education, supplemented by a broad system of adult-oriented provision and specific policy measures such as active labour market policies and financial incentives that are aimed both at securing high participation overall and at targeted initiatives designed to raise participation by the least advantaged groups (Rubenson 2006; Milana and Desjardins 2007; Green, Preston and Janmaat 2006, 165-6).

There is, then, considerable evidence on a positive relationship between lifelong learning and social cohesion. Researchers have shown that this association is positive in respect of active citizenship and social connections more broadly, in respect of individual attributes that promote social participation, and in respect of socio-economic equality more broadly. Studies of the Nordic countries suggest that this positive relationship is strongest where policy is aimed at securing high participation rates among the most

vulnerable. Even though participation rates are unequal (Milana and Desjardins 2007), they do not contribute to greater inequality because the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged is relatively low.

## 2. How many Scots participate?

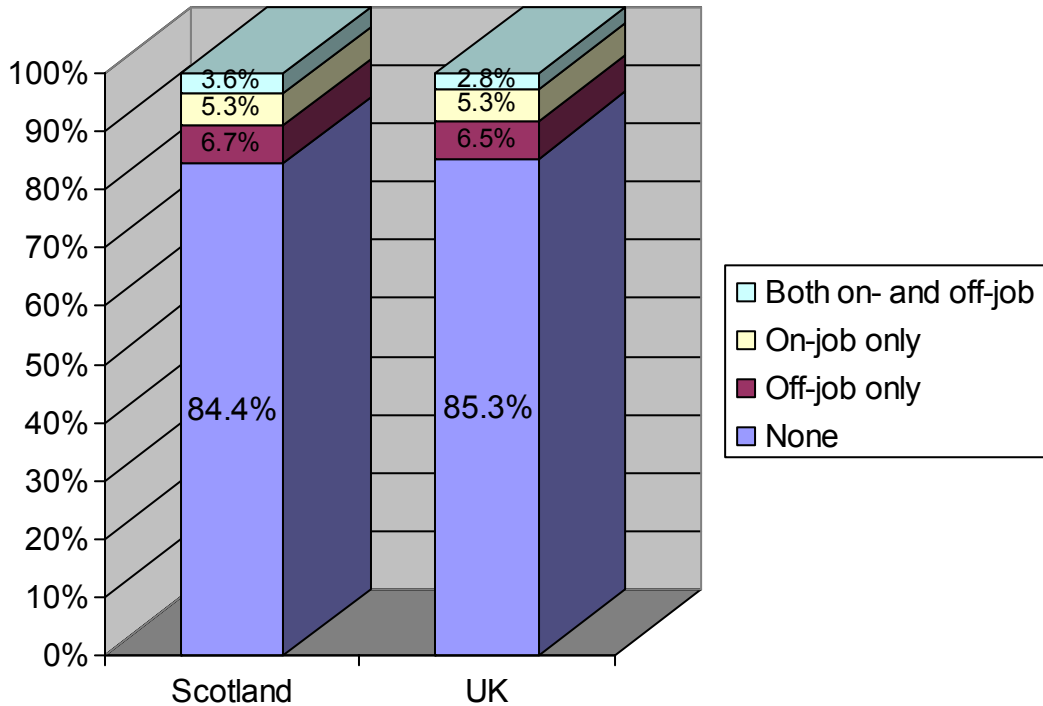
Overall, the UK is characterised by relatively high levels of participation in adult learning. The UK ranked fifth among the 20 nations that participated in IALS in the proportion of adults who undertook education or training (Tuijnman and Boudard 2001, 49-52), and fourth of 16 European nations in the proportion of workers participating in continuing vocational training (European Commission 2002, 58-9). Of course, these averages conceal enormous differences in the participation rates of different social groups, but there can be little doubt that overall participation in Britain is relatively high. The question is then whether Scotland shares this general pattern of high participation.

The short answer is that it does. Participation in job-related training appears to be high by UK standards. Labour Force Survey data show that participation in training by workers in Scotland is slightly above the UK average (Table 2.1). There is some evidence from the LFS that Scots are more likely to take either short episodes of training (defined as less than one week) or long episodes of indeterminate length. And when examined by mode of training, it seems that the Scottish advantage lies mainly in off-the job training, either on its own or in combination with on-the-job learning (Figure 2.1)

<b>Table 2.1: Percentage of people of working age participating in job-related training in four-week sample period, Quarter 2, 2008</b>			
	Men	Women	All
Scotland	6.4	10.8 <sup>1</sup>	7.7
UK	5.4	10.4	6.7
Source: DCSF 2008, Table 2.10			

<sup>1</sup> The estimate for women in Scotland is based on a small sample size and is therefore subject to a higher degree of sampling variability.

**Figure 2.1: Participation by employees in job-related training in last four weeks by type, 2008**



The Labour Force Survey is a time-limited snap-shot, and is based on reports from employers rather than workers. For these reasons, its reliability has been questioned by some leading researchers (Felstead, Green and Mayhew 1999). However, in this case LFS findings are broadly consistent with other evidence on work-related training. Data from the 2005 National Adult Learning Survey, which covered a sample of 993 adults in Scotland<sup>2</sup>, showed very similar participation rates for ‘vocational learning’ in England/Wales and Scotland in the three years before the survey<sup>3</sup> (Ormston, Dobbie and Cleghorn 2007, 7-9). Given the differences in economic structures and labour markets, as well as in the policies being adopted, this broad pattern of

<sup>2</sup> This was a one-off. NALS was commissioned by the then Department for Education and Skills, covering England and Wales.

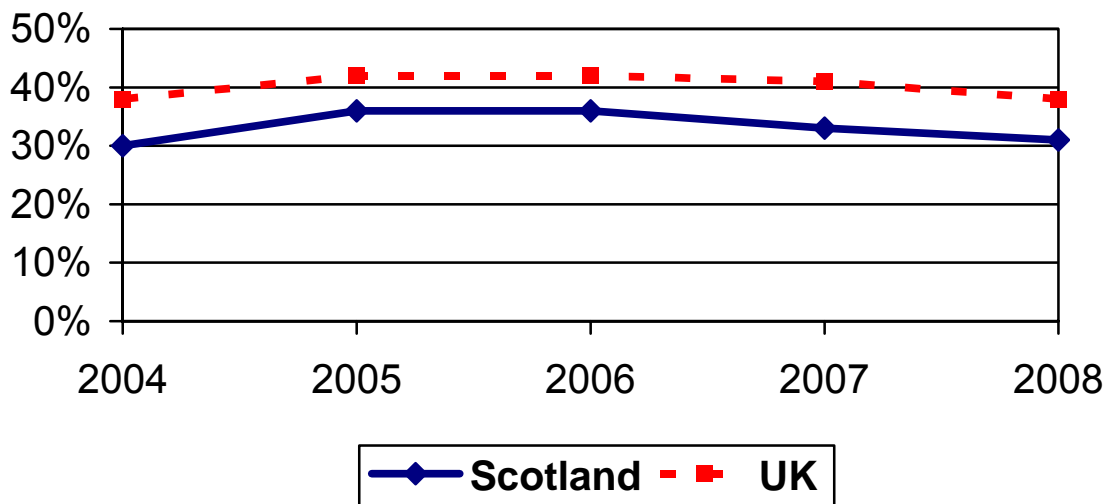
<sup>3</sup> Scottish participation rates were in fact slightly above the English and Welsh level, but not significantly so.

similarity in participation rates for vocational learning in two different surveys might be thought unexpected.

What about overall patterns of participation? Here, the variety of data sources poses something of a problem. There are two cross-sectional surveys, one of which is the one-off Scottish sample for NALS 2005, the other being the time series data from the regular surveys conducted by the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE). The two surveys produce different results, which is not surprising as they are based on different methods. This is particularly important for the field of general adult participation, where two major surveys exist, but produce very different results. Overall, NALS reports much higher levels of participation than the NIACE surveys: according to NALS, 82% of Scots had undertaken some kind of learning in the three years up to 2005, while the NIACE survey reported that 36% of Scots had undertaken some learning in the same period; for England and Wales, NALS recorded very similar proportions to those for Scotland (80%), while NIACE reported rather higher figures for England and Wales (42%).

Between 2004 and 2008, NIACE surveys routinely found participation rates in Scotland between six and eight percentage points below the UK average (Figure 2.2). This is a consistent finding, and it is statistically significant. It is also reflected in people's future intentions. In Scotland, 33% of respondents to the 2008 survey thought it likely that they would learn, nine points below the UK average of 42%; and 64% thought it unlikely, against a UK average of 56% (Aldridge and Tuckett 2008, 14). There is, though, no obvious explanation of the discrepancy between the NIACE results and the findings from NALS.

**Figure 2.2: Current and recent participation in adult learning, 2004-2008  
[NIACE surveys]**



Source: Aldridge and Tuckett 2004, 2008

There is, though, one further source. Since 2000, the British Household Panel Survey has consistently included questions on part-time learning, providing comparable data across the four nations of the UK. The BHPS is particularly significant in discerning trends over time, as it is a longitudinal survey; but it also allows for direct comparison of participation rates in Scotland with the levels for the other three nations. According to data presented in a recent analysis of BHPS (Macleod and Lambe 2006), there is a persistent gap between Scotland and the UK average, with consistently lower participation rates north of the Border. BHPS also reports lower participation rates overall.

How are we to read these different results<sup>4</sup>? The main explanation may lie in the interview approaches that are used. Both NALS and NIACE surveys are based on home interviews, and respondents are asked broadly similar questions, focusing on intentional learning (and not, therefore, incidental and unplanned learning). However, NALS respondents are given 10 statements and asked, one at a time whether each activity is something that they have

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Fiona Aldridge of NIACE for advice on the different approaches taken by the two surveys. However, she is not responsible for the conclusions I have drawn!

engaged in. Systematically used, these prompts are likely to produce higher levels of reported learning. In addition, NALS covers 16-year-olds, whereas NIACE respondents are aged 17 or over. The inclusion of 16-year-olds may go some small way to explaining why NALS should record Scottish participation levels similar to those for England and Wales<sup>5</sup>, while NIACE and BHPS report significantly lower levels for Scotland. However, the number of 16-year-old respondents is relatively small, and their inclusion will not make a big difference to the overall results.

Technically, there is no obvious reason for challenging the reliability of either survey. Both use weighted samples, with NALS interviewing 993 people in 2005 in Scotland; NIACE has smaller Scottish samples (the weighted base for 2008 was 378, for example), and although the NIACE sample is stratified at UK level, there is no separate exercise at devolved national level. BHPS suffers from drop-out, like all longitudinal surveys, but it has been repeatedly subject to peer review and is widely respected and used by UK social scientists (for further details see <http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/survey/bhps>).

At best, we may conclude that we do not know how Scotland compares with the rest of the UK. However, I conclude that there is a strong possibility that overall participation rates in lifelong learning in Scotland are below the UK average. We are on safer ground when it comes to continuing vocational training, where there is clear evidence that Scotland shares the wider UK pattern of relatively high participation.

### **3. Who participates, and who does not?**

Lifelong learning serves a number of wider goals. It has been shown that learning by adults can enhance their employability and help them achieve higher earnings, as well as producing non-economic benefits such as a greater likelihood of taking active steps to improve one's health or (Field 2009). Participation in lifelong learning can also contribute to national

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<sup>5</sup> Although the figures for Scotland are slightly higher, the researches report that this difference is statistically insignificant (Ormston et al 2007, 7)

economic capacity, by raising the skills, understanding and motivation of the workforce (including managers). But it also has a complex relationship with social and economic inequalities: although it can be a policy lever for reducing the impact of earlier educational and other inequalities, it can also – even if unintentionally – help to reinforce them, particularly if the least advantaged do not benefit from the opportunities available.

Adult education researchers have repeatedly found that participation is unevenly distributed across the adult population. It is well established in the literature that participation rates are lowest among certain clearly defined groups:

- Those with the earliest records of leaving the initial education system (usually measured in terms of their 'terminal educational age')
- Those with the weakest educational qualifications
- People from manual working class backgrounds
- People outside the labour market
- Older adults, and particularly those who have left the workforce

There are also associations between gender and participation, and ethnicity and participation, but in different ways, both of these are complicated. For example; there are differences in overall participation rates between men and women, but these are relatively small, and might be a product of other factors, such as employment status.

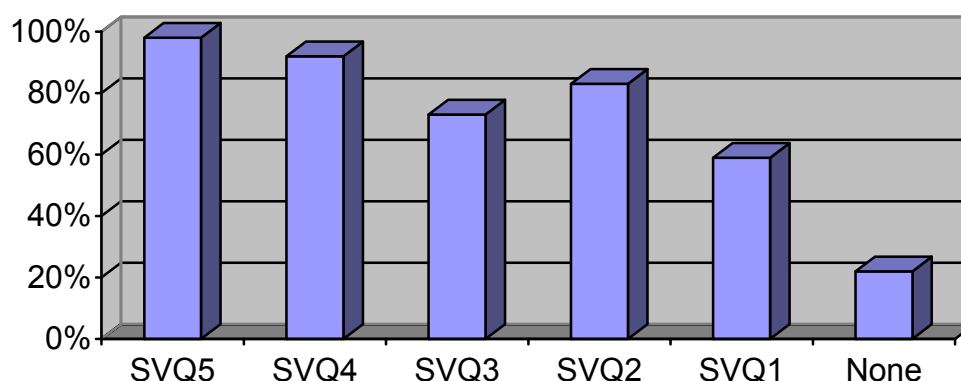
A number of sources shed light on inequality in participation rates, and they also allow us a degree of comparison with patterns in England. I will look at four of these in turn: prior education, socio-economic status and age are all well-established factors associated with different rates of participation, and in each case there is clear evidence of significant inequalities in both England and Scotland. Gender, although it has a more complex relationship with participation, is also a significant factor for policy reasons; because lifelong learning is often presented as a solution to gender inequalities, it is important to know whether women are more or less likely to be participating than men.

## Prior education

Experiences of initial education are strongly associated with participation in adult learning. Data from NALS show clearly that there is a positive association between time spent in continuous full-time initial education and participation in learning. Of those who left school aged 16 or less, 74% reported some learning in the previous three years, compared with 99% of those who left aged 21 or above (Ormston, Dobbie and Cleghorn 2007, 17). There is also a strong association with formal qualifications (Figure 3.1).

So participation as an adult is strongly linked to one's initial education. Those who have the highest qualifications, and benefited from the longest investment, are far more likely to participate in learning as an adult.

**Figure 3.1: Percentage reporting vocational learning by highest qualification, NALS 2005**

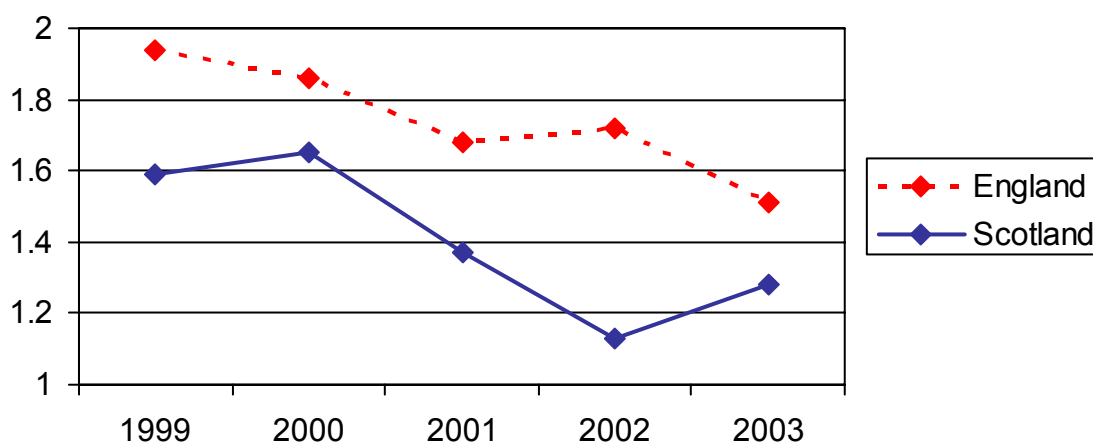


## Socio-economic status

There is also clear evidence of a positive relationship between socio-economic status and participation. NALS analysed respondents both by broad socio-economic classification and by standard occupational classification (Ormston, Dobbie and Cleghorn 2007, 21). Among the standard SEC groups, the highest rates of participation were among managerial and professional or intermediate occupations (94%/93%) and the lowest among semi-routine and

routine occupations (74%). Similar results emerge for different SOC groups, with the highest rates being reported by professionals (97%) and the lowest by process plant machine workers (74%) and 'elementary' occupations (67%).

**Figure 3.2: Ratio of professional:unskilled worker participation in part-time learning in Scotland and England – BHPS**



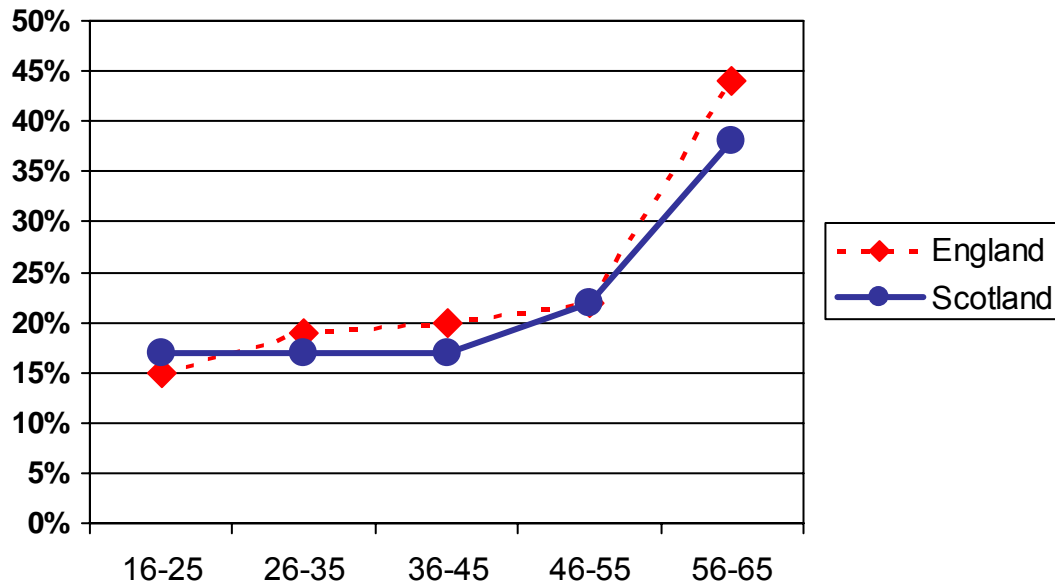
BHPS data confirm this broad picture of socio-economic inequalities of participation. They also allow us to compare the Scottish pattern with the English pattern. Figure 3.2 above presents the ratios for participation by professionals and unskilled workers; although there is a clear if varying gap in both countries, the size of the gap in Scotland is smaller. This suggests a higher degree of inequality in England, and a lower degree of inequality in Scotland.

### Age

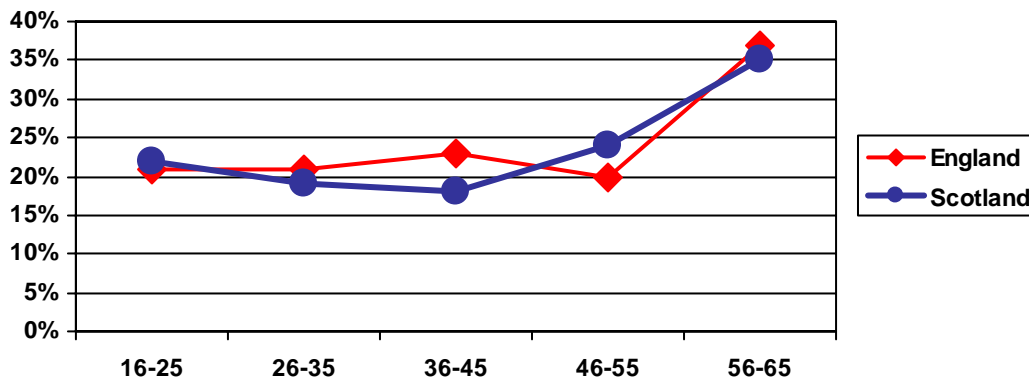
IALS data provide a baseline for the analysis of skill distribution by age. Taking the proportion at Level 1 in prose literacy, there is clearly a steep gradient in respect of age (Figure 3.3). Interestingly, this runs counter to popular media portraits of stupid youngsters, and particularly shows that low literacy rates are much higher among people born between 1931 and 1940, many of whom experienced an education interrupted by war and austerity. Popular stereotypes are partially confirmed when it comes to numeracy (Figure 3.4). While there is again a clear peak or weak skills among older

adults, there is also some evidence in Scotland of a generation of what we might call “Thatcher’s children”, who entered secondary education between 1981 and 1991, and whose skills are weaker than is the case for adults in the middle age groups.

**Figure 3.3 Proportion of adults at Level 1 in Prose Literacy - IALS, 1996**



**Figure 3.4 Proportion of adults at Level 1 in Quantitative Literacy - IALS, 1996**



If the IALS data show considerable inequalities of *skill* by age, NALS data show similarly marked inequalities of *participation* according to age. Participation rates among the youngest group aged 16-39 were notably high at 93%, but fell dramatically to 40% among adults aged 60 or above. Figure 3.5 presents the ratios for participation by both age groups for Scotland and England/Wales, and shows that inequality by age is considerably steeper in

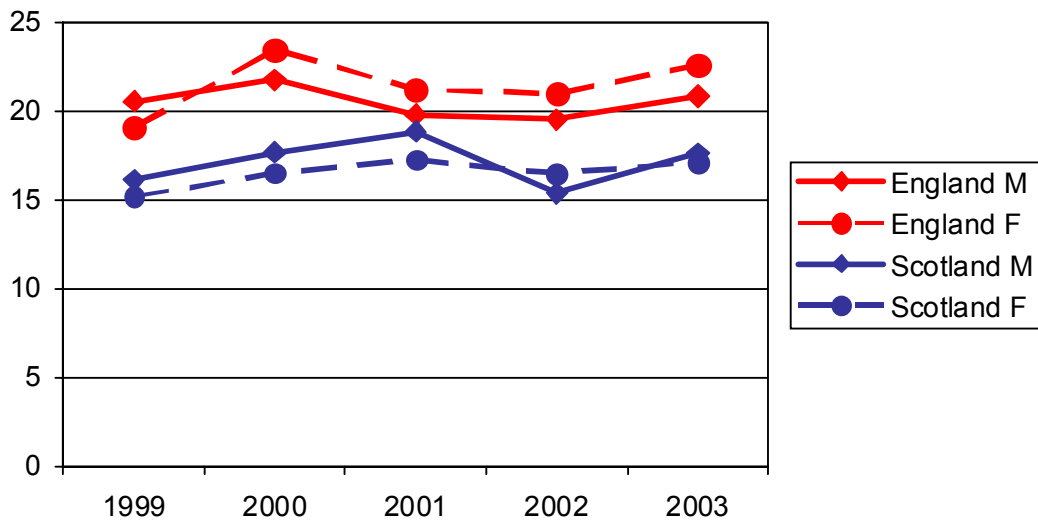
Scotland. A large proportion of this is explained by very high participation among the youngest age group in Scotland: 93% of 16-39 year olds reported participation in some learning, compared with 86% in England and Wales; and 81% reported participation in taught learning, against 71% in England and Wales. This may in fact help explain in part the overall NALS finding on adult learning rates in Scotland: NALS has picked up on the very high level of participation by young people in Scotland. This is, though, not balanced by high participation later in the life span. In Scotland, unequal participation by age in learning is therefore likely to reinforce the unequal distribution of skills arising from earlier experiences of initial education.

<b>Table 3.1: Ratio of participation rates in learning for Scotland and England/Wales by age group, NALS 2005</b>		
	Scotland	England/Wales
16-39:60+	2.325	1.720
40-59:60+	2.075	1.600

### Gender

Evidence on gender patterns of participation is somewhat complex. Overall, the BHPS data suggest that while women generally report slightly lower levels of learning than men, the difference is small (Figure 3.5). NALS data suggested a wider gap, with 87% of men reporting some learning in the previous three years as compared with 78% of women, and 75% of men and 69% of women reporting some learning in the past 12 months; these patterns were also found in England and Wales (Ormston, Dobbie and Cleghord 2007, 15). However, we have already seen that women workers in the LFS are more likely to have undertaken training than men, both in Scotland and in the UK as a whole (see Table 2.1). There is, then, some evidence of gender inequality in participation, but this may need to be analysed further in order to establish what mechanisms are at work.

**Figure 3.5: Adult participation in part-time learning in relation to gender, Scotland and England – BHPS**



The evidence in this section is that on all these measures, participation in Scotland is unequal, often highly so. There are clear inequalities by prior education, socio-economic status and above all age. There is also evidence for some gender inequality in participation. When comparing Scotland with England, on some measures there is evidence that participation rates in Scotland show a small but still clear tendency towards greater equality. This is not to say that nothing more should be done to achieve greater equality, of course, and the Scottish pattern is anyway much more unequal than that of the Nordic nations.

Current levels of inequality are simply incompatible with the current policy goals of the Scottish Government, which emphasises the importance of lifelong learning in contributing not only to economic development but also to achieving “social justice, stronger communities and more engaged citizens” (Scottish Government 2007, 6). Indeed, it could be argued from the Nordic evidence that sustainable economic growth itself depends on a significant degree of educational egalitarianism, or at least on strong policies designed to minimise the extent of skills distribution levels (Green, Preston and Janmaat 2006). We are then some way from achieving the goals that the Government has set.

## Conclusions

We can summarise the existing situation as a glass half full. By European standards, overall participation is relatively high, and it is particularly high in relation to continuing vocational training. Overall participation is probably lower than the UK average. There are marked inequalities of access for the least advantaged. While in some cases the degree of inequality is below the UK average, it is above the UK average in respect of age, which should be a significant policy concern given (a) what is known about learning as an inhibitor of cognitive decline and (b) future Scottish demographic trends. And there are marked basic skills challenges, as there are for the whole of the UK. These suggest that there are some significant strengths in Scotland's lifelong learning system, but also some risks which threaten to jeopardise ambitions for a knowledge economy. In particular, they are not compatible with aspirations for an inclusive knowledge economy.

Looking ahead, this analysis does not suggest to me that we are in a crisis. But neither are there any grounds for complacency. In the short term, there are clearly specific issues arising from the credit crunch (levels of financial literacy are the most obvious of these) and the recession (managing and avoiding unemployment being the most pressing). In the longer term, we can anticipate a number of social, economic and cultural trends that will ensure that lifelong learning is never far from the policy agenda, and more probably will continue to be a central concern. If it remains the case that policy makers in Scotland will seek to promote a knowledge economy that is inclusive, and that relies on lifelong learning for all rather than focusing investment solely on a small technocratic minority, then there is probably much still to be done.

My own view is that the time is probably ripe for a major public review of Scotland's lifelong learning system, with the view of establishing clearly where its strengths and weaknesses are; how it fits into wider strategies for social cohesion and economic growth; and what should be done to align the system

with broader policy priorities. In particular, we need to address some significant risks and gaps. We simply do not know enough about our existing system. Finding out what is spent on lifelong learning would pose a major practical challenge, and we are some way from establishing clear and regular baseline information on participation and provision. Tackling skills utilisation strikes me as an extremely sensible policy priority, given what we know about the productivity gap, but it is unlikely that it can be achieved through voluntarism and exhortation; yet international experience suggests that there is no easy path through statutory intervention. And even if Government is satisfied with current skills levels, our existing skills distribution is too wide to meet the needs of a knowledge economy, and it means that important groups are at risk of being left behind. Socially and economically, levels of participation among older adults are not merely sub-optimal but unacceptable.

Meanwhile, governance is a mess. Responsibilities are divided between Councils, Holyrood and Whitehall in ways that are not always helpful. At local council level, community learning is highly vulnerable to budget cuts, as we have seen in the last year. And some key questions for Scottish policy concern the programmes managed by the Department for Work and Pensions. It is not immediately clear to me that programmes aimed at helping unemployed people find work are always geared to the requirements of Scottish demography and the Scottish labour market.

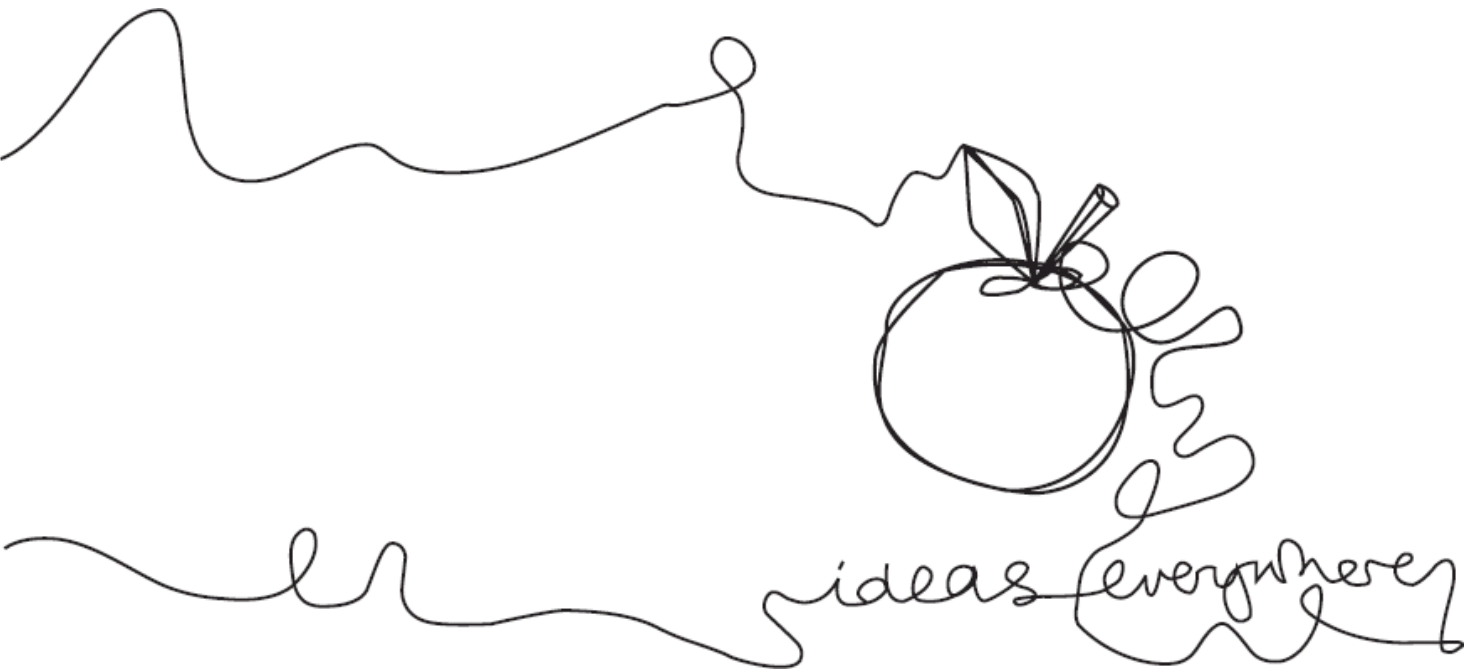
This is a long list, and suggests that we need something of a 'national conversation' about adult learning and skills. A public inquiry into adult learning and skills would undoubtedly raise the profile of what has become a rather neglected area, and would force us to ask and answer some important questions about what we are doing now to prepare and support people for life in a knowledge economy, and what we need to do in the future. We will also be able to realign the system with our own public priorities. Currently, we have a set of funding arrangements – public and private – that work together systematically to favour those people who are financially and educationally better off. They are also systematically skewed, sometimes in ways that can be justified relatively easily, but sometimes in ways that drive learners down

particular pathways – in terms of institutions, timing, and outcomes – that may be suboptimal. And they are largely channelled through national government, with relatively marginal inputs from other levels of public decision-making. Many of us might groan long and loud at the thought of another Cubie-type committee, and yet another review, not least because the Cubie problem – namely, the financial support system for higher education students – is still unfinished business, and quite a few people have acquired a stake in collective silence on this topic. But these are major and pressing issues, and despite all the disadvantages, a public inquiry into the role and nature of a balanced and forward looking system for lifelong education seems sensible and timely.

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