

Session 2.

Understanding UK education policy and reform - historical and comparative lenses

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Session objectives

By the end of this session students should be able to understand:

- why historical analysis is important for understanding education policy and reform
- the major phases of UK educational development from 1944 to the present
- the characteristics and limitations of the Anglo-Saxon education model
- educational trajectories within the UK, particularly the divergent experiences of England, Scotland and Wales
- contrasting patterns of educational development in the UK and China
- the challenges facing education systems in an era of technological, economic and social transformation.

Section 1.

Why study education historically?

Why history matters

Education systems are products of history as well as policy.

- Present-day systems embody earlier political settlements, social values and development pathways.
- Current reforms are often adaptations of inherited traditions.

United Kingdom

- Industrialisation created demand for mass schooling and workforce preparation.
- Expansion of secondary and higher education reflected changing economic and social needs.
- Since the 1980s, marketisation, accountability and competition - dominant organising principles.
- Contemporary policies continue to operate largely within this Anglo-Saxon tradition.

China

- Confucian traditions - a long-standing emphasis on education, examination and merit.
- Socialist state-building expanded educational provision and national integration.
- Reform and Opening-Up combined international learning with national development.
- Contemporary policy integrates educational modernisation with strategic state planning and technological development.

Education systems are shaped by multiple factors

- historical legacies
- political ideologies
- economic change
- social struggles
- international influences

The dominant factors can help explain the slow pace of change in the UK case

Section 2.

The UK - an Anglo-Saxon system settlement

Primary drivers of historical change – the UK case

Political ideologies

- Social democracy (1944 settlement)
- Neoliberalism and marketisation (1980s onwards)
- Third Way modernisation (New Labour)
- Contemporary tensions between state intervention and institutional autonomy

State restructuring and governance

- Centralisation versus local authority control
- Devolution after 1999
- Growth of academies, trusts and quasi-markets

Economic change

- Deindustrialisation
- Growth of the knowledge economy
- Skills agendas and international competitiveness
- Higher education expansion

Policy – a historical periodization

1944-1979 - Welfare state settlement - expansion of public education, strong role for local authorities, tripartite system

1979-1997 - Market reform and central control - testing and accountability, school choice/competition between institutions, reduced local authority influence

1997-2010 - Modernisation and state activism - raising standards/outcomes, social inclusion and investment in schools and colleges

2010-2024 - Academisation and System Fragmentation - expansion of academies, academic curriculum reform, increased institutional autonomy

2024 - Towards a New Settlement? Labour Government reforms since 2024

English education – elitist & exceptionalist

Key features

- Successful higher education system and high performing elite schools
- Large private school sector has disproportionate access to elite universities
- Upper secondary education narrow and 'exceptionalist'
- Weak vocational education and small apprenticeship system.

Middle performing

High performing elites + persistent underperformance among disadvantaged groups.

Higher education expansion and stratification

Strengths

- World-class universities
- Strong research performance
- International reputation

Challenges

- Institutional hierarchy
- Tuition fees
- Regional inequalities
- Graduate labour market pressures

Further and vocational education - neglected middle tier?

- Colleges as civic institutions
- Skills and workforce development
- Lifelong learning
- Regional economic development
- Vocational education and lifelong learning contracting
- Seen as a second-class route

Overall historical assessment: system polarisation

High-performing core

- Near-universal school participation
- Strong examination outcomes
- World-class universities
- Continued demand for higher education

Weaker periphery

- Declining vocational participation
- Severe contraction of lifelong learning
- Persistent NEET populations
- Rising exclusions and alternative provision
- Significant regional and social inequalities

What kind of system has England become?

Characteristics

- High accountability
- Institutional diversity
- Quasi-market competition
- Strong central steering
- Complex governance
- Middle performance outcomes compared to European counterparts

International comparison

Viewed as one of the most market-oriented education systems in the world – intensification of the Anglo-Saxon model

Section 4.

The UK - one state, four education systems

System divergence within the Anglo-Saxon settlement

England

- Market-oriented reform
- Institutional diversity
- Accountability and competition

Scotland

- Comprehensive tradition
- Broad curriculum
- Strong public ethos

Wales

- Social inclusion and wellbeing
- Less marketisation

Northern Ireland

- Academic selection
- Divided historical legacy
- Growing reform pressures

Divergent vocational and lifelong learning outcomes after devolution (1999-2024)

England

- Stronger marketisation and competition
- Major contraction in adult learning participation
- VET increasingly overshadowed by higher education
- Adult FE participation fell by around **50% (2010-24)**

Scotland

- Integrated tertiary education framework (further and higher education)
- Strong role for FE colleges and Higher National qualifications
- Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework supports progression
- Adult FE participation declined much less than England (**-18% vs -50%**)
- **Wales**
- Emphasis on social inclusion, community and adult learning and wellbeing
- CoAdult FE participation declined more slowly than England (**-17% vs -50%**)
- Vocational learning linked to wider social and community objectives

Section 5.

UK and China - historical trajectories compared

UK Anglo-Saxon model – system stasis?

Dimension	1945-1980	1980-2010	2010-2025	Assessment
School participation	Major expansion	Universalisation largely complete	Stable	Mature system
School attainment	Gradual improvement	Rapid rise in GCSE/A-level success	Plateauing	Stasis
PISA and international performance	N/A	Mixed	Broad stability	Stable
Vocational participation	Significant FE/adult learning presence	Mixed expansion then stagnation	Sharp contraction	Decline
Lifelong learning	Strong adult education traditions	Gradual erosion	Severe contraction	Decline
Higher education participation	Elite system	Massification	Continued growth	Question of sustainability
Graduate employment premium	Strong	Strong	More variable	Signs of saturation
Educational expenditure	Long-term growth	Expansion	Constrained growth	Stasis

China's political state-led model – transformation?

Dimension	1949-1978	1978-2010	2010-2025	Assessment
School participation	Expansion of basic education from low base	Rapid universalisation of compulsory education	Near-universal participation	Mature system
School attainment	Major regional variation	Rapid improvement in attainment and completion	Continued improvement and high international but with internal variation	Strong upward trajectory
International performance	Limited international comparison	Entry into global benchmarking	World-leading performance in leading regions	High performer in parts
Vocational participation	Technical education linked to state planning	Expansion to support industrialisation	Renewed emphasis on skills and advanced TVET	Strategic growth but status issues remain
Lifelong learning	Workplace and collective learning systems	Expansion of adult and continuing education	National lifelong learning agenda emerging	Developing
Higher education participation	Elite system	Massification following 1999 expansion	Continued rapid expansion and diversification	Expanding system
Graduate employment premium	Strong state allocation	Strong graduate demand	Growing graduate competition and credential inflation	Emerging pressures
Educational expenditure	Limited resources	Sustained expansion and investment	High and sustained strategic investment	Continued growth

Historical trajectories compared

UK (2010-2025)

- High-performing parts
- System drift and polarisation
- Plateauing outcomes
- Declining VET and lifelong learning
- No clear post-reform settlement

China (2010-2025)

- Strategic transformation and capacity-building
- Continued educational investment
- Expansion of skills and innovation systems
- Education linked to national modernisation

Comparative Insight

The UK appears to have exhausted a previous phase of educational development, while China continues to articulate new educational objectives linked to economic, technological and societal transformation.

Two questions

- 1. Why does one mature education system appear locked into an inherited model while another is generating new developmental trajectories?*
- 2. How far can the UK Labour Government reform an education system that has been shaped by four decades of marketisation, competition and institutional fragmentation?*