

## **Lifelong learning in Scotland: cohesion, equity and participation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Scottish Government, in common with governments elsewhere in Europe, is committed to promoting high and inclusive levels of participation in adult learning. The paper reviews currently available evidence on participation, and concludes that while overall participation in Scotland is high by international standards, there are some indications that it falls slightly below the UK average in some respects. Data for particular sub-groups suggest that participation levels vary considerably, and in some cases there are strong indications that on some criteria, inequality rates are higher for Scotland than for England and Wales. In particular, there is some evidence that older adults and the least well qualified are particularly disadvantaged in Scotland. This suggests that Scottish policy makers face considerable challenges in achieving an inclusive learning society and high skills knowledge economy.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Governments everywhere claim to be promoting lifelong learning. The language and concept are dominant in European Commission (EC) policies for education and training, reflecting a pervasive belief among European Union (EU) member states in the importance of continual learning, across a variety of institutional contexts, as a means of enabling people, enterprises and communities to adapt and thrive in a challenging, highly competitive and dynamic global marketplace (European Commission 2001). By 2000, coalitions of influential actors persuaded both the EC and OECD to conclude 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, with the aim of achieving 'lifelong learning for all' (Schemmann 2007: 77-8, 125-9).

This paper examines participation in adult learning in Scotland against the background of this remarkable and important policy development. A number of different factors are at work (see Edwards 1997; Field 2006), with differing impacts across different nations and regions, but three features stand out as particularly significant. First, there has been a marked shift away from policies promoting adult education as a relatively minor service, and towards an emphasis on learning as a continuing process that should take place across and throughout the life span. Second, they place lifelong (and lifewide) learning at a central position within the wider education and skills system, rather than focussing on adult education as

traditionally conceived. Third, they switch attention away from structures of provision and towards the securing of a culture in which individuals and organisations take an active responsibility for ensuring their own security and well-being by anticipating change and planning their own learning.

In Scotland, lifelong learning policies were an early concern of the devolved government (Cooke 2006), and have continued to preoccupy policy makers since. In September 2007, shortly after entering office, the newly-elected Scottish Government published a skills strategy that, according to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, “sets out what our objectives need to be to develop a cohesive lifelong learning system centred upon the individual but responsive to employer needs”. It was 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). Subsequently, the Scottish Government (SG) issued a joint statement with the local authorities on the future of community learning and development services, which provide community-based adult learning along with youth work and community development. The statement formed part of a wider process of dialogue, intended to achieve “our joint purpose of a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth” (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and SG 2008: i).

The Scottish Government, then, claims to promote lifelong learning as a way of fostering economic growth and social inclusion. In this, it broadly shares the overall policy goals for lifelong learning that have been adopted elsewhere in Europe, as well as in the other nations of the UK. Nevertheless, Scottish policies do show some distinctive features. In its policies for skills, the Scottish Government has identified employer demand for, and utilisation of, skills as an important policy area, along with a more conventional focus on skills supply. Its policies for community-based learning are even more distinctive; perhaps because it forms part of a wider integrated service that provides youth work and community capacity building, policies for community-based learning have tended to place a clearer focus on equity and social justice than is usually found in similar policy statements elsewhere (see for example Scottish Executive 2004). However, the joint COSLA/SG statement appears to indicate a change of direction. While it continues to emphasise “the vision that we all share – of a Scotland where communities are stronger and all our people can play a full and fulfilling part” (COSLA/SG 2008, 7), it also sets out a more managerial and audit-led approach which is designed to concentrate attention on outcomes, and particularly emphasises the importance of community based learning in promoting basic literacy and numeracy and English for speakers of other languages. This is in turn part of a wider development across Scottish Government, which has adopted a system of Single Outcomes Agreements with local authorities, apparently in an attempt to reconcile decentralised provision with a central mechanism for steering.

This paper examines the relationship in Scotland between adult participation in learning and the promotion of social cohesion. I say little about provision in this paper; as elsewhere the shift towards a policy focus on lifelong learning has been associated with the modernisation or displacement of existing structures and

forms. In this paper, though, I concentrate on demand for learning and its effects. The analysis is presented 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; the third section explores issues of equity and cohesion in participation in adult learning. The paper concludes that Scotland's existing lifelong learning system is probably poorly placed to contribute to social cohesion in the future.

## **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 forms one dimension: one way of defining a cohesive society is as one in which a wide range of citizens engage movements and associations of various kinds, and have wide-ranging reciprocal bonds with one another. This suggests a positive association between learning and cohesion, as there are well-established links between adult learning and active citizenship (Field 2005). Yet lifelong learning is also associated with greater flexibility and mobility – most obviously occupational and geographical but also in terms of personal identity and intimate relationships - which may reduce levels of cohesion. In the middle of the last century, for example, William Beveridge noted that wholesale labour transference “should be regarded as bad social policy” because it means “a sacrifice of social capital” (Beveridge 1944: 87). We may therefore ask whether participation in learning tends to promote social capital, or rather tends to undermine people's social bonds and civic engagement, for example by increasing levels of geographical, occupational and social mobility. Participation in lifelong learning may also lead to greater socio-economic inequality, particularly if access to education and training is distributed differentially across the population.

Most existing research concludes that the relationship between learning and cohesion is a positive one. More recent studies also point to a causal relationship.

First, let us consider research on the relationship between adult learning and active citizenship. Although adult learning is under-researched by comparison with learning among children and young people, a relatively large body of case studies and cross sectional surveys exists that support the view that adult learning and active citizenship are positively related (this literature is summarised in Field 2005). In Scotland, a survey of over 600 literacy and numeracy learners 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 & Maclachlan 2007: 154-7). Recent analyses of longitudinal cohort data suggest that people who participate in learning are more likely to engage in civic activities and movements, as well as to show greater racial tolerance (Feinstein *et al.* 2003: 24-8), indicating a degree of causality in the relationship. It has been suggested that 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).

Second, cohesion – at least in an active sense - requires high levels of self-efficacy. One of the most consistent themes in both qualitative research and practitioner narratives is the belief that adult learning produces gains in confidence (Knasel, Meed & Rossetti 2000, Tett & 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 have, on the contrary, posed a number of challenges to any easy assumptions about comprehensive education and socio-economic inequalities (Paterson & Ianelli 2007). Until recently, very little research has been undertaken into the contribution of learning in the adult life course as a factor in socio-economic inequality. Given the evidence on the impact of initial education, though, it is at least 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 equality on the IALS measures for literacy and numeracy were the

Nordic nations; those with the greatest levels of inequality 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 & 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 & 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 & Desjardins 2007; Green, Preston & Janmaat 2006: 165-6).

The studies summarised here tend to use rather formal definitions of learning; thus the cohort studies ask respondents about attendance at taught courses. Few studies have examined relationships between informal learning and social cohesion. This is a significant gap, but for our purposes it can be discounted for the time being, as the focus of this paper is primarily on those types of learning that are directly influenced by public policy. Informal learning is certainly influenced indirectly by public policy; the quality of library services, for example, can shape opportunities for self-directed learning for some people. And informal learning can certainly affect public policy, as when parents exchange information and ideas about the secondary school system. So informal adult learning is by no means irrelevant, but the focus of the present paper is primarily upon formal learning.

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 Nordic participation rates are unequal (Milana & Desjardins 2007), they do not contribute to greater inequality because the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged is relatively low. These findings are significant ones, suggesting that adult learning may have an important role to play in promoting social cohesion.

### **HOW MANY SCOTS PARTICIPATE?**

Like the Nordic nations, the UK is characterised by relatively high overall levels of participation in adult learning. The UK ranked sixth among 20 nations in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in the proportion of adults who

undertook education or training (Tuijnman & 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). 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.

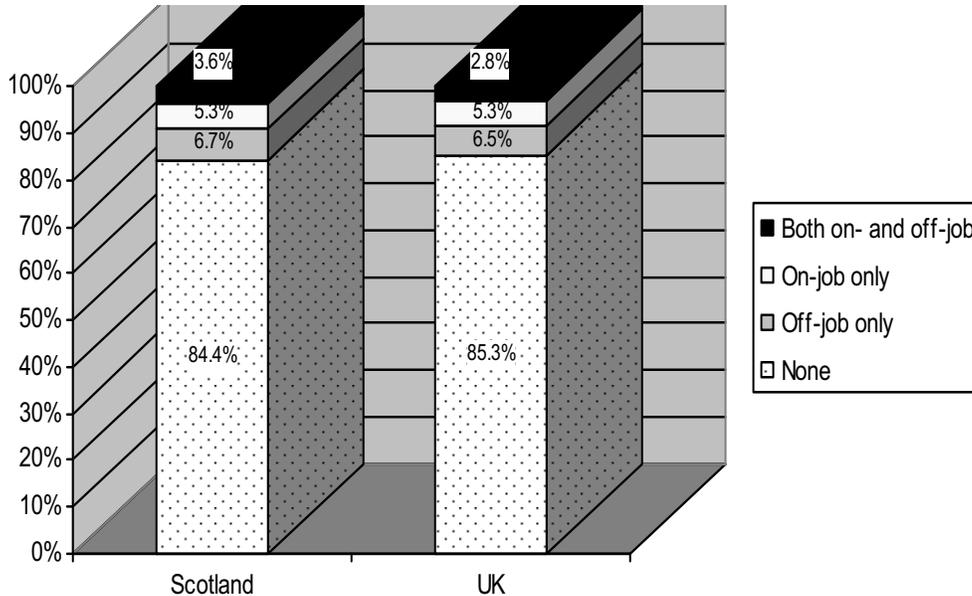
The short answer is that it does. Participation in job-related training appears to be high by UK standards. Labour Force Survey (LFS) data show that participation in training by workers in Scotland is slightly above the UK average (Table 1). There is some evidence from the LFS that Scots are more likely to take either short episodes of training (defined as less than one week) or long episodes of indeterminate length. 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 1).

*Table 1: Percentage of people of working age participating in job-related training in four-week sample period, Quarter 2, 2008*

	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 1: Participation by employees in job-related training in last four weeks by type, 2008.



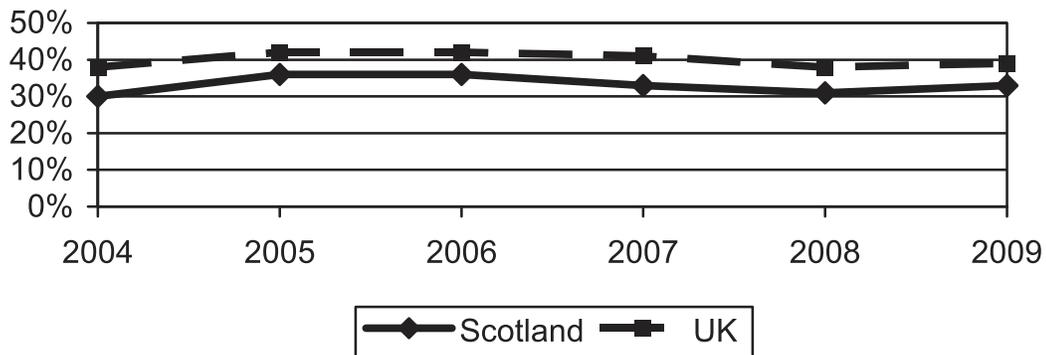
The LFS is a timed snap-shot, based on reports from employers when workers themselves are unavailable. For this reason, its reliability has been questioned by some leading researchers (Felstead, Green & Mayhew 1999). However, the LFS findings are broadly consistent with other evidence on work-related training. Data from the 2005 National Adult Learning Survey (NALS), which covered a sample of 993 adults in Scotland, showed very similar participation rates for 'vocational learning' in England/Wales and Scotland in the three years before the survey (Ormiston *et al.* 2007: 7-9). Given the differences in economic structures and labour markets, as well as in the policies being adopted, this broad pattern of similarity in participation rates for vocational learning in two different surveys might be thought unexpected.

What about overall patterns of participation? Different data sources suggest different answers, which 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 are based on slightly differing approaches, with NALS supplying respondents with detailed prompts about different learning events and activities. It therefore tends to show higher aggregate rates of participation, and is the more likely of the two surveys to capture information about less formal types of learning. NIACE, on the other hand, has conducted surveys for a number of years, using the same approach each time, and generates robust time series data. It does not use the same range of detailed prompts, and therefore tends to report types of learning that are recognised immediately as such by respondents.

As we might expect given these differences, NALS reports much higher levels of overall 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 2009, NIACE surveys routinely found participation rates in Scotland between six and eight percentage points below the UK average (Figure 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 2009 survey thought it likely that they would learn, four points below the UK average of 37%; and 65% thought it unlikely, against a UK average of 59% (Aldridge & Tuckett 2009: 14). The consistency of the NIACE findings on current participation and future intentions over time is impressive. On the other hand, the NIACE survey involves a smaller Scottish sample than NALS, and it may therefore be open to challenge.

*Figure 2: Current and recent participation in adult learning, 2004-2008 (Aldridge & Tuckett 2004, 2008, 2009)*



There is, though, one further source. Since 2000, the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) has 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. It has a clear focus on the more formal types of learning, and does not set out to measure informal learning. Nevertheless, the findings are more consistent with NIACE than NALS. Analysis of BHPS shows a persistent gap between Scotland and the UK average, with consistently lower participation rates in Scotland (Macleod & Lambe 2006).

Taken together, these three sets of data confirm that Scotland has relatively high levels of overall participation by international standards. Two of them indicate that within the UK, overall Scottish participation rates are below average, while the third suggested that Scottish participation rates are similar to England's. As both

of the time series surveys consistently suggest that overall participation rates in adult learning in Scotland are below the UK average, it is reasonable to conclude that this is likely indeed to be the case. When it comes to continuing vocational training, the evidence again confirms that Scotland shares the wider UK pattern of relatively high participation.

## **SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN PARTICIPATION**

Adult education researchers have repeatedly found that participation is unevenly distributed across the adult population. Among the best-established findings in the literature are those showing that participation rates are particularly low among certain clearly defined groups (see McGivney 1990), including 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, and older adults, 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 five of these in turn: prior education, socio-economic status, income 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 showing a rather 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.

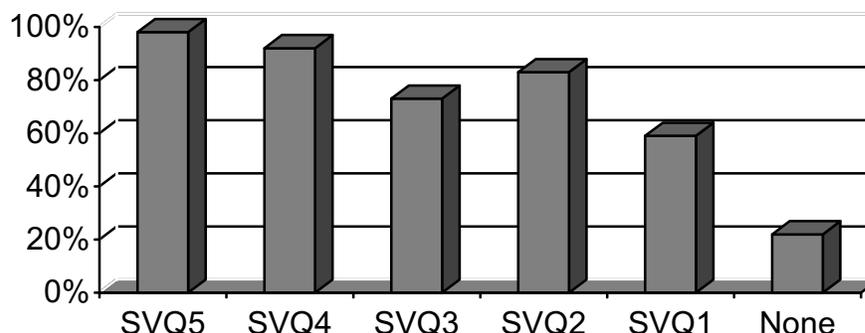
### *Prior education*

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).

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. This is certainly not unique to Scotland; on the contrary, it appears to be ubiquitous. Table 2 therefore shows two simple 'inequality ratios', in which the highest qualified (those possessing qualifications equivalent to a Level 5 National/Scottish Vocational Qualification) are compared with those with the weakest or no qualifications (English and Welsh data for this and subsequent tables comes from Snape, Tanner & Sinclair

2006). On this basis, participation appears less equal in Scotland than in England and Wales.

*Figure 3: Percentage of Scottish respondents reporting vocational learning by highest qualification, NALS 2005*



*Table 2: Ratio of participation rates in learning for Scotland and England/Wales by highest qualification, NALS 2005*

	Scotland	England/Wales
N/SVQ5:No qualifications	6.666:1	2.109:1
N/SVQ5:N/SVQ1	1.724:1	1.405:1

#### *Socio-economic status*

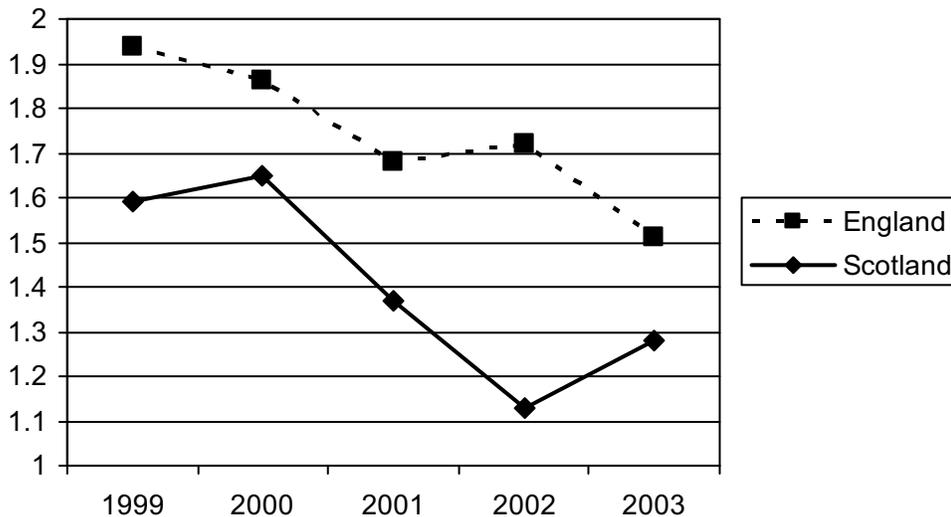
As elsewhere, there is also clear evidence of a positive relationship between socio-economic status and participation. NALS analysed respondents both by broad socio-economic classification and by standard occupational classification (Ormston, Dobbie & Cleghorn 2007: 21). Among the standard SEC groups, 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%). Table 3 shows that although participation is also very unequal in England and Wales, the inequality ratios are higher in Scotland.

*Table 3: Ratio of participation rates in learning for Scotland and England/Wales by occupational grouping, NALS 2005*

	Scotland	England/Wales
Managerial:elementary	1.804:1	1.275:1
Professional:elementary	2.065:1	1.391:1

BHPS data confirm the broad pattern of socio-economic inequalities of participation (Macleod & Lambe 2006). They also allow us to compare the Scottish pattern with the English pattern. Figure 4 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 survey therefore suggests a higher degree of inequality in England, and a lower degree of inequality in Scotland, at least in terms of broad socio-economic status.

*Figure 4: Ratio of professional: unskilled worker participation in part-time learning in Scotland and England – BHPS*



#### *Income*

Participation in learning is positively associated with household income. In NALS 2005, 40% of people in households with incomes below £10,400 a year said that they had done some learning, against 86% of people in households with incomes above £31,200 (Ormston, Dobbie & Cleghorn 2007: 127). In this case, the inequality ratio is markedly higher in Scotland than in England and Wales (Table 5).

*Table 5: Ratio of participation rates in learning for Scotland and England/Wales by household income, NALS 2005*

	Scotland	England/Wales
£31,200+:£10,399 or less	2.150:1	1.406

### *Age*

NALS data show similarly marked inequalities of participation. 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. Table 6, which presents participation ratios for both age groups in Scotland and England/Wales, 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.

*Table 6: Ratio of participation rates in learning for Scotland and England/Wales by age group, NALS 2005*

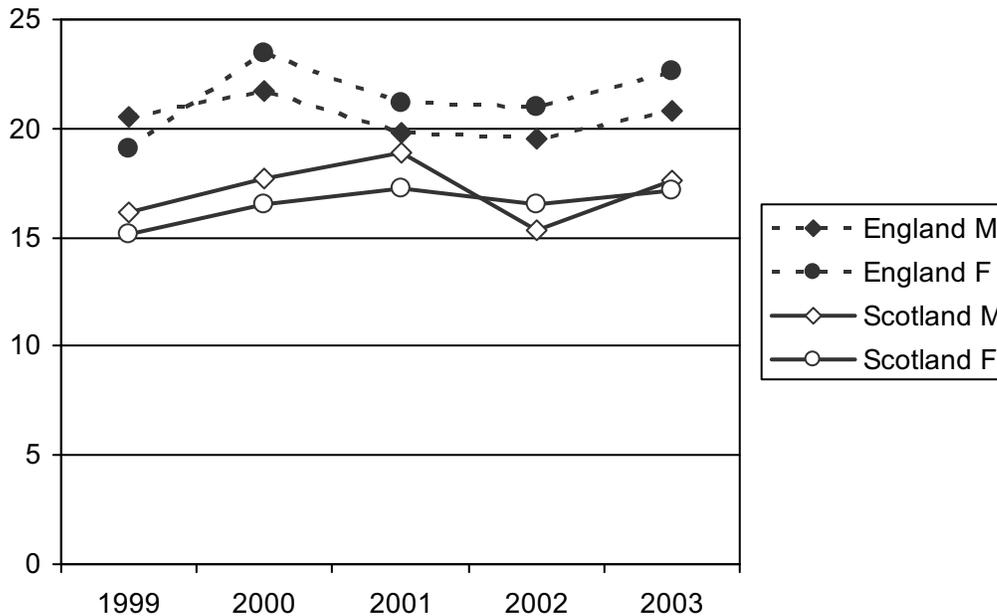
	Scotland	England/Wales
16-39:60+	2.325:1	1.720:1
40-59:60+	2.075:1	1.600:1

### *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 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 overall patterns were also found in England and Wales (Ormston, Dobbie & 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 1). According to the inequality ratio (Table 5), gender inequality in BHPS is slightly

lower in Scotland than in England. 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 5: Adult participation in part-time learning in relation to gender, Scotland and England – BHPS*



On balance, then, the evidence in this section confirms that aggregate patterns of participation in Scotland are distributed unequally. By comparison with England, inequality of participation by socio-economic status is markedly stronger in Scotland; there is also greater inequality between different age groups, and between people with different types of qualification. Gender inequalities, though, appear to be less marked in Scotland. While adult learning is often justified by practitioners and policy makers as a type of second chance for those who gained the least from initial schooling, the evidence reviewed here shows that these inequalities persist in adult life. There are clear inequalities by prior education, socio-economic status and above all age. There is also evidence for some gender inequality in participation.

Scottish education is often described as relatively meritocratic and egalitarian, particularly by UK standards. The evidence reviewed here confirms this social democratic self-image in some respects, but not in others. 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. So there is a smaller disparity between participation levels from different occupational groups in Scotland than in England. This is not to say that nothing more should be done to achieve greater equality, of course, and it remains the case that the

Scottish pattern is anyway much more unequal than that of the Nordic nations. When it comes to age, the analysis here suggests that inequality of participation is greater in Scotland than in England.

Current levels of inequality are 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 & Janmaat 2006). Scotland’s lifelong learning system is, then, some way from achieving the goals that the Government has set.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Judged against the policy aims of the Scottish Government, the current situation can be seen as a glass half full. By European standards, overall participation is relatively high, and it is particularly high in relation to continuing vocational training. While overall participation is probably lower than the UK average, Scotland still has a higher level of participation than many other developed nations. The data analysed here would place Scotland below the four Scandinavian nations and New Zealand, but ahead of Canada, the Netherlands and Ireland and most other OECD members (Tuijnman & Boudard 2001: 19). Overall, then, participation is relatively high, but not when compared with the small, open Scandinavian nations.

There are marked inequalities of access for the least advantaged. Given the stated commitment to equality of successive Scottish administrations since 1998, this marked level of inequality may be thought surprising. Of course, participation rates are higher in all nations for the better-off, the young, and those with the best levels of initial education, even in Scandinavia where participation rates are highest (Rubenson 2006). But there is some evidence that inequality rates are higher in the UK than in Scandinavia, and on most counts the evidence reviewed here suggests that inequalities are greater in Scotland than in England.

Admittedly, the evidence on socio-economic inequality, income inequality and educational inequality is ambiguous. NALS data suggest that inequality levels on these three counts are higher in Scotland than in England and Wales; however, BHPS data suggest that participation rates for different occupational groups are more equal in Scotland. Inequality levels appear to be 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.

Overall, this evidence on equity and participation should cause considerable concern to practitioners and policy makers alike. It also suggests that there is

plenty of scope for researchers to look more closely at the relationship between participation and cohesion in the Scottish context. Despite the considerable strengths of educational research in Scotland more generally, major gaps remain when it comes to the analysis of adult learning. Again, this is not a good basis on which to develop policy and practice.

Looking ahead, this analysis does not suggest that Scotland's lifelong learning system is 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. Even if the Scottish Government were 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. If policy makers in Scotland are indeed seeking 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 much remains still to be done.

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