

# Foreword

My friend and colleague David Raffe, Professor of Sociology of Education at Edinburgh, died unexpectedly in February 2015. His quiet wisdom still is greatly missed. I continue to believe that the most important of his many contributions to the study of education systems was the brilliant 1999 paper “The case for ‘home internationals’ in comparative research” (Raffe et al., 1999). This outlined just how rich could be the comparisons between Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England. This remains salient and important. It forms a key part of the methodological background to and motivation for the four-nation study included in this issue of *Research Matters*, and also helps in resolving some of the policy dilemmas and conflicts raised by the “future of education” debates described in the final article here. Why is his paper so important... still? The answer lies in the distinctive character of the British Isles – the existence of similar (though not identical) structures of education, common family structures, common labour markets and economic pressures, and so on. All this means that implementation of different models of education across the four nations comprises a massive, long-term natural experiment. In the 1970s and 80s, the differences in Scottish education were leading to higher equity and attainment rising more rapidly than other parts of the UK. But the 2010 introduction of major curriculum changes in schools has seen the Scottish lead disappear, and not just because of rising performance in England – both have introduced new national curricula in the last decade or so but, crucially, with very different models and principles driving those respective instruments. The fact that the nations are going in such different directions but are comparable in so many other ways gives this profound “crucible of comparison”. It’s what policymakers should pay huge attention to, and what other nations lack – a means of discriminating between the many conflicting voices and approaches in the calls for reform and innovation; a rich source of insights into what has brought about improvement and what has not. In addition, across the UK we enjoy a wealth of data beyond the periodic global transnational surveys (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS) – although the early 2000s gap in national testing in Wales and the 2017–present cancellation of the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy removed some of the valuable data for tracing equity and attainment across all systems. And our national data allows robust longitudinal analysis, something which the cross-sectional studies like PISA (which tests successive groups of 15 year olds) cannot really achieve. David was right to point out just how powerful these “home internationals” are; and we keep alive his spirit of rich enquiry and policy support in the work we are continuing to do.

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Raffe, D., Brannen, K., Croxford, L., & Martin, C. (1999). Comparing England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: The case for ‘home internationals’ in comparative research, *Comparative Education*, 35(1), 9–25.