

Session Title:	The Dragon, the Thistle and the Shamrock (2.1)
Speaker(s):	Vicky Bannerman and Andrew Jackson
Chair:	N/A
Reporter:	Louise Wylie

Speaker/Institution Bio/Information:	Vicky Bannerman, University of Strathclyde Andrew Jackson University of South Wales
Overview/Aim of session:	To provide information on the secondary, FE and HE systems of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. To illustrate important differences from England, which is often treated as the standard, and implications for university admissions and recruitment which are often misunderstood.
Workshop Content	<p>Wales</p> <p>Education and Qualifications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualifications can be studied in Welsh or English • No academies, free schools or state grammar schools • GCSEs graded A–G • AS/A Levels still in use (A-/A-S structure) • No T Levels • The number of young people speaking Welsh is increasing <p>Advanced Skills Baccalaureate Wales</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Level 3 qualification • First awarded in Summer 2025

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designed for 16–19 year olds • Can be taken alongside other Level 3 qualifications • Consists of three graded projects (A–U) • More substantial than an EPQ • Equivalent in size and demand to an A Level <p>Higher Education in Wales</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 universities and 1 conservatoire • Student enrolments are decreasing, unlike the rest of the UK • Around 50% of students studying in Wales are Welsh-domiciled, but Wales is a net importer of students • High proportion of widening participation students, mature learners and students living at home • Business and Management is the most popular subject area • Courses must be available bilingually, with limited exemptions for specialist provision • Specialist funding available, including the NHS Wales Bursary Scheme (with a post-study work requirement) <p>Student Finance (Student Finance Wales)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tuition fees capped at £9,790 per year • Welsh students receive a mixture of grants and loans for tuition fees and living costs • Funding available for each year of undergraduate study <p>Scotland</p> <p>Education System</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) applies nationally • School structure: P1–P7 (Primary) and S1–S6 (Secondary); no sixth forms • National 5s are equivalent to GCSEs and usually taken in S4
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highers and Advanced Highers replace A Levels and are usually taken in S5–S6 • Students may leave after one year of Highers, but most stay on to S6 • No BTECs or T Levels • Colleges offer HNC/HND qualifications, which count towards funding entitlement <p>Scottish Baccalaureate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Available in Sciences, Languages, Expressive Arts and Social Sciences • Made up of related Highers or Advanced Highers plus an interdisciplinary project • Not widely taken • Universities typically focus on individual qualifications within it, rather than the Baccalaureate <p>Language (Gaelic)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protected under the Gaelic Language Act (2005) with equal status to English • Just over 1% of the population speak Gaelic fluently • Strongest presence in the Western Isles, with growing numbers in Glasgow • Gaelic Medium Education available across multiple local authorities • Gaelic can be studied as a modern language • Some university courses are taught in Gaelic, particularly at the University of the Highlands and Islands <p>Higher Education in Scotland</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 19 HE institutions, including 15 universities, a conservatoire, a school of art, a college of higher education and the Open University in Scotland • Four ancient universities, with the oldest founded in 1413 • Undergraduate degrees typically last four years
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undergraduate Masters degrees (e.g. MA (Hons)) are common • Greater flexibility within degree programmes, particularly in first year • Widening access target: by 2030, 20% of entrants from the 20% most deprived backgrounds • Government-controlled student numbers can make entry highly competitive • Tuition is free for Scottish-domiciled students studying their first degree • Fees are uncapped for students from the rest of the UK and internationally <p>Student Finance (SAAS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Awards Agency for Scotland pays tuition fees directly to providers • Bursaries and or loans available for living costs • Maintenance support is income-assessed • Funding available for HND to degree routes, including a 1+ gift year • Loan repayment threshold is £32,745 • Loans are written off after 30 years <p>Northern Ireland</p> <p>Education System</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three main school types: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Controlled schools (historically Protestant) ◦ Catholic Maintained schools ◦ Voluntary grammar and integrated schools • School year structure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ P1–P7 (Primary) ◦ Y8–12 (High school) ◦ Y13–14 (Sixth form) • GCSEs graded A–G • Vocational qualifications include BTECs • AS and A2 structure still in use
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most schools have sixth forms, with many students remaining at the same school • Regional FE college hubs also operate (e.g. Belfast Met) <p>Language (Irish)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irish recognised as an official language since 2022 • Irish-medium education available in around 30 schools, mainly primary • Irish can be studied as a subject in English-medium schools • Some courses taught partially or fully through Irish <p>Higher Education in Northern Ireland</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three universities: Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University and the Open University • Two university colleges, including St Mary's • Degrees typically last three years • Higher-level apprenticeships available • Government cap on the number of NI-domiciled students • Limited capacity means many NI students study outside Northern Ireland <p>Student Finance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tuition fee cap of £9,535 per year (subject to change) • Reduced fees for students studying at home (approximately £4,855) • Maintenance loans and grants available for lower-income students • Loans written off after 25 years
Case Studies/Examples:	N/A

Scenarios/Roundtable discussions:	N/A
Questions and Answers:	We mostly spoke about the cap on Scottish students and how this makes some places for Scottish students at university incredibly competitive. We also mentioned that clearing will not be a viable option for Scottish students because the places have been allocated after the equal consideration deadline.
SummaryKey takeaways:	Education systems across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland differ significantly from England and from each other. Wales offers bilingual education, retains GCSEs and AS/A Levels, and has introduced the Advanced Skills Baccalaureate Wales in 2025. Scotland uses Curriculum for Excellence, with National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers replacing GCSEs and A Levels, and offers four-year undergraduate degrees with free tuition for Scottish-domiciled students. Northern Ireland retains academic selection, AS/A2 A Levels and widespread school sixth forms. All three nations prioritise widening participation, have distinct student finance systems, and face capacity or demographic pressures shaping student mobility.