

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:	<p>To provide information on the secondary, FE and HE systems of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.</p> <p>To illustrate important differences from England, which is often treated as the standard, and implications for university admissions and recruitment which are often misunderstood.</p>
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

- 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

Higher Education in Wales

- 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)

Student Finance (Student Finance Wales)

- 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

Scotland

Education System

- 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

- 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

Scottish Baccalaureate

- 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

Language (Gaelic)

- 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

Higher Education in Scotland

- 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

- 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

Student Finance (SAAS)

- 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

Northern Ireland

Education System

- Three main school types:
 - Controlled schools (historically Protestant)
 - Catholic Maintained schools
 - Voluntary grammar and integrated schools
- School year structure:
 - 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

	<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.