Early policy response to COVID-19 in education—A comparative case study of the UK countries

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Introduction

In this article, we report on a series of analyses that we carried out during the early course of the pandemic. In early 2020, researchers in the Education and Curriculum Team in Cambridge Assessment Research Division started a project that we called Curriculum Watch. The aim of this project was to collate a literature and documents database of education and curriculum policies, research and analyses from across the four countries of the United Kingdom (UK).

Our work was inspired by the work of Raffe et al. (1999) who set out the positive benefits gained from comparing the policies of "the UK home nations"[2]. We anticipated that our Curriculum Watch database would provide a growing resource that could inform our understanding of education and curriculum issues beyond the UK. The literature base would also serve as an archive of events and our reflections on them. This is particularly useful as the presence of policy documents is sometimes short-lived, reflecting movements in policy decision-making.

As the pandemic hit the UK in February 2020, it affected education policy in ways that were difficult to foresee. It was also challenging at the time to make sense of the policy shifts that were occurring. This context presented us with an opportunity to use our literature base to make sense of the emerging educational picture.

Having a base of comparative policy and research literature allowed us to see how policy developments converged or diverged across the different countries of the UK, allowing us insight into some of the issues influencing education decision-making. We used our emerging literature data to conduct a multiple case study analysis to look more closely at the fast-changing policy contexts of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as they responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our observations covered the major pandemic-related education policy shifts that occurred in the six months from mid-March to mid-August 2020.

Case studies allow the exploration of issues in their context (Yin, 1981), for example allowing consideration of the historical or political factors that influence a policy shift, with the aim that the conclusions of the analysis can generalise beyond the specific

1 The work was carried out when the final author was a member of the Research Division.

2 A note on terminology: We use the term "nation" throughout this paper except when referring to the countries of the UK (since Northern Ireland is not a nation). Our use of the term "the home nations of the UK" is a direct reference to the terminology used by other scholars.

cases studied. By extending the method to a "multiple-case study" it is possible to gain insight into the complex and nuanced particularities of single cases through placing them alongside a group of broadly similar cases (Heale & Twycross, 2018, p.7).

In the next section, we will outline some of the methodological considerations that underpin Curriculum Watch. We go on to analyse some of the key areas of UK policy formation and content (in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment) that we observed during the first six months of the unfolding pandemic. We then reflect on our analysis, considering the impact of the methods that we have chosen.

The benefits of comparative study methods

It is argued that there is an inevitable degree of implicit comparison needed to make sense of anything (Laming, 2004; Wilson, 2011). Cross-national study is perhaps an obvious methodological choice when trying to understand the policy conditions of any one nation. By juxtaposing observations, there is the potential for similarities and differences to be identified. It is also important to consider the degree of closeness of case studies when using this method. Bryman (2016) for instance argues that selecting case studies that are substantially similar in many aspects is appropriate, where differences found between the cases in the analysis are less likely to be attributable to inherent differences between the cases at the outset (p.68). A methodology of "most similar comparisons" (Paterson & Ianelli, 2007, p.332) allows careful study of changes in parallel systems and enables policy learning (Raffe, 2005). This is because the closeness of selected cases reduces the number of variables that need to be explained through analysis.

Multiple case studies have been favoured in social research as, it is argued, insights from multiple cases allow for theory-building to a greater extent than a single case approach (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991; Eisenhardt, 1989). The closeness of contexts also means that it is possible to construct a "policy laboratory" in which "different solutions to common problems can be put into practice simultaneously" (Paun et al., 2016, p.11), offering the opportunity for evidence exchange and policy learning across the UK (The Institute for Government, 2019). This closeness also allows each country to see what is possible in a context that is largely similar to their own (Croxford & Raffe, 2014).

As well as generating insight into how governance works across the different parts of the UK (Simkins, 2014), comparative study downplays the importance of the social and contextual particularities of the systems that lie within national boundaries, and heightens a focus on the structural similarities and interdependences of neighbouring systems (Raffe et al., 1999). Although this contextual downplaying can be seen by some to be a weakness of the method, it is considered by others as a way of undermining "container thinking" (Lidher et al., 2020, p.6). This type of thinking can be problematic as it can lead systems to over-focus on internal policy shifts without acknowledging the influence on their policy environment of factors stemming from beyond their own borders.

One of the premises of cross-national study is that borders between different nations are porous and that there is interdependence between nations. The question is whether this same premise can be applied to the countries of the UK, with an assumption that the UK is "a system" containing a set of similar, regional cases. This question is especially pertinent

since the different countries of the UK have diverse historical and cultural characteristics. This has led some to argue that the UK policy context is more accurately described as "a disunited Kingdom" (Donnelly & Osborne, 2005, p.148), with this disunity increasing with the devolution of administrative and executive responsibilities for education policies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since the 1990s.

UK policy: system or systems?

Some commentators point to significant features of overlap between the constituent countries of the UK, which means that they have more in common with each other than either of them does with any other national system. Drawing on Richardson's (1982) original analogy of different national policy "styles", Cairney (2013) argues that there is an "impressive degree of policy style convergence" between the UK countries (p.8). Within this, there are still specific national traits: the Scottish Government's implementation style involves closer engagement with local authorities in a "bottom-up" approach that differs from the other UK countries' top-down control (Cairney, 2013, p.8; see also Keating, 2010). The qualifications systems of England and Wales have been closely linked since 1917, while the Northern Irish qualifications system has drawn closer to that of England and Wales since its political partition from the rest of the island of Ireland in 1920. England, Wales and Northern Ireland have based their curricula on the same statutory guidance since 1988 (although the Welsh Government is currently in the process of implementing a new Curriculum for Wales that is not based on this guidance). Raffe et al. (1999) point to the overwhelming similarities between the social contexts and social relations across the four countries of the UK in comparison with those of other nations. They note that there are similar levels of social mobility and class inequality across the four countries, and that gender differences across the four countries are more alike when compared with those of many other nations. Finally, Paterson and Ianelli (2007) and Raffe et al. (1999) observe that the systems are economically interdependent, with all four education systems interacting with an economy which is integrated and organised at a UK level. As a result, we would expect policy influences to drift across the borders of the UK countries.

Another feature of our comparative methods approach is that it has a longitudinal dimension, attending to the way that policy changes over time. This policy change is also situated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which can be characterised as an unfolding crisis. To support our analysis, we also look to literature that considers policy decision-making in times of crisis.

Crisis response literature

Our study makes use of a unique and unusual opportunity to examine simultaneous government responses to a common challenge, and to study the factors and conditions that drove decision-making processes. A common limitation of comparative policy scholarship is that issues unfold over a long period of time, and key aspects of decision-making are often difficult to identify or disentangle as a result (Capano et al., 2020; Grødem & Hippe, 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a common and transboundary problem to governing elites that prompted a response in a specific time frame. It is evident that a body of literature analysing policy communities' responses

in different case study countries has already started to take shape.[3] This article adds to the emerging literature in this field. In addition, while crisis management is dealt with in many social science disciplines, including international relations, business studies, public administration, and communication studies, there is a general gap in research on collective "lesson learning" in the aftermath of crisis (Boin et al., 2018, p.33; Broekema, 2016; Hart & Kuipers, 2018). Simply cataloguing the policy measures adopted to date generates a database of raw data that can be used for such policy learning. Going beyond cataloguing measures, further and systematic analysis can then highlight interrelationships or important variables such as timing and sequencing (Capano et al., 2020; Howlett, 2019).

There are, moreover, key insights that we can draw from the crisis management literature that are relevant for understanding education policy responses in the UK countries. Policy literature and organisational studies examining institutional responses show, for example, that crises demand coordination at multiple levels within a network of organisations that may not be used to working with each other (Boin et al., 2018). Public bureaucracies, such as ministries, can often be seen to adapt poorly to crisis circumstances, given that routine business in a government body or public agency may require a radically different set of operating principles than crisis management, which requires flexibility and improvisation (Boin et al., 2018). The pandemic, as an external shock event, raises questions about how national policy response was constructed by governments, both cognitively and ideologically, and whether national policy styles (Howlett & Tosun, 2019) are discernible in the formulation of this response. How effectively governments manage and deploy policy narratives in times of crisis is also a factor that can vary widely between countries (Mintrom & O'Connor, 2020), even when comparing countries with similar policy regimes. In addition, the literature suggests examining not only variety in the "composition of the policy mix", but also variety in the timing of policy adoption, as well as the "intensity" or "stringency" with which various tools are deployed (Capano et al., 2020, p.297; Knill et al., 2012).

Cross-national study method

A principal aim of our Curriculum Watch initiative was to create a mechanism for locating and bringing together curriculum documentary evidence relating to the four countries of the UK. To do this, each researcher in the Education and Curriculum team took responsibility for gathering relevant documentary sources for one of the countries of the UK. This longitudinal source-gathering exercise allowed us to construct a picture of curricular policy change as it emerged in each country.[4] The second aim was to gather commentary and discourse related to curriculum policy change so that we could better understand any of the broader socioeconomic issues relating to such initiatives, but also

3 See for example: Masri and Sabzalieva (2020) on Higher Education responses in Canada; Sibieta and Cottell (2020) on education policy responses across the UK nations to the pandemic; and Mintrom and O'Connor's (2020) analysis of variation in policy response at the US state level.

4 For example, there is currently a great deal of interest in Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence. It was implemented in 2010 and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is commissioned to review it in 2021.

stakeholder responses. For this reason, we included a range of documentary sources such as journal papers, conference outputs, news articles and blog posts.

We developed a database to bring together and organise our literature. This involved establishing a coding structure for documents added to the database. These codes (which include tags such as "Assessment", "COVID", "Curriculum structure/organisation", "Deprivation/Disadvantage/Vulnerable learners", etc.) allowed us to retrieve documents according to theme if we had a specific analysis that we wanted to pursue. We also constructed timelines for each of the countries. The timelines included the significant dates for educational and curricular events or developments in those countries. This process helped us to be aware of significant pieces of information that would be important to us when interpreting or analysing documents from a specific country.

In March 2020, as the impact of the pandemic on UK education policy was becoming more apparent, we decided to observe, document and monitor the emerging policy picture across a number of themes (policy in the first three months of the pandemic; changes to assessment; learning access, resources and assessment guidance; and curriculum choices).

This article builds on the outcomes of these observations (which were written in the moment of the shifts that they reported)—taking a step back in perspective. This step back allows us to carry out systematic analysis that can highlight interrelationships or important variables that may have not been visible at the time of the original data collection.

So far we have explored the debate around the extent to which the UK has one or many policy systems, and the potential of comparative study methods for gaining insights into the taken for granted (or "container") thinking that can potentially limit the understandings of how a policy system works. We have also suggested (drawing on the crisis response literature in public administration and organisational sociology) that an analysis of the unfolding policy story that occurred during the pandemic can provide an evidence basis for later "lesson learning". In the next section we describe the policy picture that emerged in the first six months of the pandemic across the four countries of the UK. This analysis looks specifically at curriculum guidance, pedagogy and assessment, and proceeds as follows. We first examine key similarities and differences in policy formation in the four countries in education response, including the involvement of different stakeholders in the policy process. We then focus on differences and overlaps of policy content in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

Analysis

Policy formation

The closing of schools triggered debate early on in all four countries on: the challenges of alternative assessment arrangements in light of the common decision to cancel the 2020 summer examinations; challenges around delivering the full curriculum; and how curriculum considerations would be integrated into subsequent recovery plans. In their responses, national governments of the UK countries demonstrated some differences in their policy formation approach and the level of guidance given to schools and local authorities. England opted for a more detailed and prescriptive approach to curriculum

guidance, publishing updated guidelines periodically and with individual guidance tailored to different Key Stages (Department for Education for England, 2020c). Wales and Northern Ireland, however, issued guidance that was general and less prescriptive, advising schools to be "responsive to changing circumstances" (Welsh Government, 2020a, p.2) and to adapt to the current context while "continuing to deliver the spirit of the statutory Northern Ireland curriculum" (Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 2020a, p.2). The detailed advice on the curriculum at secondary level that is evident in the Department for Education's (DfE) guidance for England is absent from national guidance issued in the other three countries. In addition, not all UK countries issued updated national guidance in view of rapidly changing contexts. As such, while curriculum guidance for England was issued after it became clear there would be a return to face-to-face learning, Northern Ireland's curriculum guidance (published end of June) was not updated in light of this development.

The Scottish approach of devolving key aspects of curriculum decision-making and curriculum preparation to local authorities also makes the Scottish response distinct from the other countries. As with Wales and Northern Ireland, the Scottish Government issued broad guidelines for schools regarding the curriculum. Yet, curriculum preparation in the recovery has been largely entrusted to local actors including Early Learning Centres, schools and partnership colleges (Scottish Government, 2020e). The role of local authorities therefore makes for an interesting comparison. The Scottish policy approach ensures local authorities and schools have a key role in policy enactment, and as a result, local Scottish authorities have provided detailed curriculum implementation support with guidance issued on planning and timetabling, but also support mechanisms for teachers. This is evident in for example Glasgow City Council's (2020) Recovery, Resilience and Reconnection framework. This arrangement of formal devolvement to local authorities is absent in England and Wales. However, councils in England and Wales have nonetheless been proactive in issuing their own guidance to schools, such as by outlining possible strategies to address lost learning and student wellbeing. For instance, Coventry City Council (2020) hosted a digital platform of information to support the mental health of learners, updating this as government advice became available.

Evidence from another UK study provides an early indication that pandemic responses that closely involve local authorities may see more success in terms of policy outcomes: Scottish and Welsh responses on the provision of free school meals proved more effective as they were delivered by local authorities, using existing infrastructure and demonstrating flexibility to families' needs (EPI Report: Sibieta & Cottell, 2020).

The issue of stakeholder engagement, and more specifically the transparency of such engagement, differs across the four countries. In the public discourse around the formation of policy on school return in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there is evidence of the range of voices who were consulted in this process. For example, in Scotland the C-19 Education Recovery Group included teaching union and local authority representatives, with the minutes of these meetings being published on the Scottish Government's (2020a) website. In Wales, the National Education Union (NEU) outlined that it was having regular meetings with the Welsh Government around the arrangements for school reopening, while in Northern Ireland, these policy decisions were "co-designed by the Department of Education, school leaders and key partners comprising Managing Authorities, trade unions and sectoral support bodies" (Department of Education for

Northern Ireland, 2020b). All of these cases contrast with the situation in England where the discourse was centred on headteachers and teaching unions "telling the government for weeks that the reopening plan was unworkable" (Weale, 2020), with requests from the Trades Union Congress (TUC) to include unions in the taskforce to plan return to school (TUC, 2020). This is also evident in the decision in England to hold an autumn exam series: while this decision was made following a consultation between the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and stakeholders in April–May, schools and colleges appear to have had their concerns about available support for exam delivery amid schools reopening, and associated costs, largely sidelined.

A possible consequence of differences in consultation approaches is that it might affect the extent of professional engagement with policy content, and more specifically with policy change. On the one hand, we note a lack of clarity on key issues such as arrangements for 2021 examination sessions in the analysed time frame, as definitive decisions about future assessment were not forthcoming. In other instances, policymakers' responsiveness has meant that policy change was at times rapid, and sometimes resulted in a reversal of previous positions. The policy around opening schools for face-to-face education around the summer of 2020 was one such case. In England, where stakeholder engagement with policymaking appeared most opaque, there was a great deal of resistance to this policy from teacher unions, leading to a government U-turn around when primary school pupils would return (Weale, 2020). In contrast, when the Welsh Government announced that all students should return to school (not just specific year groups), there was negotiation with local authorities to determine term dates and how schools would re-open, which was welcomed by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT, 2020) union.

Policy content

In this section we look at some of the key curriculum, pedagogy and assessment content areas that were covered in policy decisions in the first six months of the pandemic across the countries of the UK.

Curriculum

A key issue that the four countries have grappled with in the wake of the pandemic is the question of curriculum adaptation, and finding the balance between core learning (e.g., a focus on reading, vocabulary, writing and mathematics) and breadth of learning in difficult and uncertain circumstances. Maintaining the full breadth of the curriculum, where possible, emerges as an important consideration, particularly in the national curriculum guidelines for secondary level published in England. England's guidelines show that flexibility is encouraged up to Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14), but schools are advised to discourage their pupils from dropping subjects altogether (DfE for England, 2020e). The requirements of qualification specifications for Key Stages 4 (ages 14–15) and 5 (ages 16–18) mean that they lack the flexibility allowed in earlier Key Stages. The rationale underpinning this guidance is that maintaining a broad and balanced curriculum ensures choices for further study and employment are not reduced, and that learners are taught a wide range of subjects (DfE for England, 2020e). In comparison, in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, there has been more allowance for flexibility, and guidelines are less prescriptive. Scotland's guidelines have proposed a minimalist, core-learning

approach (Scottish Government, 2020c), and beyond this general indication, the Scottish Government encourages curriculum planning at the local level. In Northern Ireland, the curriculum is in any case ordinarily non-prescriptive and flexible. The decision in Wales to temporarily suspend basic curriculum requirements in June (Welsh Government, 2020b) is also an indication that Wales is prepared to adopt a flexible approach to the curriculum in its policy response.

The ongoing debate on how to balance "catch up" learning in the curriculum with student wellbeing is one that has drawn wider stakeholder debate in each of the four countries. The Welsh Government's plan for managing student wellbeing is particularly comprehensive, and is likely a reflection of the Government's commitment to emphasise health and wellbeing in the curriculum prior to the pandemic (see Public Health Wales, 2020). In Scotland, there is a similar emphasis on health and wellbeing in the published national guidance. Pupils in Scotland have experienced the shortest period of school closure in the UK (11 weeks, compared to 12–14 weeks in other UK countries). This could be an explanation of why guidance provided by some Scottish councils (see e.g., Glasgow City Council, 2020) favours short-term solutions to facilitate pupils' return to face-to-face learning: that is, focusing on student wellbeing in the first two weeks following the return to school to help pupils "reconnect".

Pedagogy

Two areas of pedagogy that were heavily discussed during this stage of the pandemic response were around blended learning arrangements (including access to technology and concerns around equity), and around the safety of pupils' physical return to schools.

There was a common concern across all of the countries with regard to ensuring disadvantaged learners were not adversely affected by the physical closure of schools to most learners at the start of the lockdown period in March 2020 (DfE for England, 2020a; Scottish Government, 2020b; Welsh Parliament Research Service, 2020; NI Direct, 2020). Despite their shared concern, there was evidence that the different countries approached the issue differently. For example, some targeted digital resource support to all disadvantaged learners (Scottish Government, 2020d), while others initially targeted this to specific age groups (DfE for England, 2020b).

When looking at the conditions around teaching in post-lockdown classrooms, there were clear differences in the measures taken by some of the countries around monitoring (and informing) classroom practices. In Scotland, inspections were put on hold (TES, 2020), while in Wales, inspections were suspended to enable inspectors to support the curriculum through engagement visits (Estyn, 2020). In Northern Ireland, inspections were suspended but there would be visits to check on compliance with COVID-19 safety rules (but these would not be shared with parents) (O'Brien, 2020). These positions contrast with the approach in England where the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) announced it would begin school visits to establish how they were "getting back up to speed", with normal inspections (which seek to grade schools and make judgements) planned to return in January 2021 (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, 2020). This suggests differences in emphasis, with England appearing to signal a more immediate return to external performance monitoring (even if this is not the intended message) compared with the teacher support focus of inspection visits for teachers in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Finally, arrangements for planned off-site education in international settings were equally affected across the four countries. Three policy announcements by the UK Government were directly referenced by the advice conveyed by some of the devolved administrations. Initially, the UK Government advised schools and colleges to cancel overseas trips in early March (UK Government, 2020a). The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) then advised British people to return immediately to the UK less than two weeks later (UK Government, 2020b). This advice was subsequently superseded by FCO advice around travel corridors to specific countries in July (UK Government, 2020c). This advice had an undoubted effect on planning for school trips across the countries of the UK. Advice from both the Scottish and Welsh Governments reiterated the FCO advice and advised against international educational visits (Scottish Government, 2020f; Welsh Government, 2020c).

Assessment

One of the key elements of the education response debate during the pandemic has been the question of assessment. As all UK countries cancelled the 2020 summer examination series, attention quickly shifted to arrangements for awarding student grades by August. This took on a broadly common formula of a two-step process of grade calculation: in the first instance, centres and teachers would decide the grade that each learner was likely to have achieved had they sat their exams. This grade would draw on teachers' judgements, and evidence such as prior work and mock exam results. This data would subsequently be used by the awarding body, together with a rank order list of students provided by schools, and a centre's historical performance, to calculate a final grade.

While these alternative awarding arrangements emerged as broadly similar, they also had their own specificities. For instance, England and Wales could be seen to have adopted a similar approach, but with some differences in the type of data used, as the Welsh and Northern Ireland grade calculation models used different prior attainment data to England (Qualifications Wales, 2020).

The scope for appealing grades was an area where countries adopted a different approach. Students in the different countries could appeal grades through their centre on specific grounds, for example if it was suspected that either the centre or the awarding body had made a technical error. Scotland additionally set up a priority review system for appeals from candidates with a conditional university or college offer (Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2020). It is evident that the scope for appealing Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) in England was more limited from the outset in comparison to the other three countries: this is because it was determined early on that a full autumn exam series would be available as an option for students dissatisfied with their calculated grades (Ofqual, 2020).

With regard to formative assessment, national guidance issued in England recommends the use of regular formative assessment, such as quizzes and pupil observation, as a tool in classrooms to determine new "starting points" in education, and to ascertain the scale of lost learning (DfE for England, 2020c). Scotland's national guidance clarifies expectations that the Curriculum for Excellence will continue to apply, and also recommends teachers to use informal assessment to collect evidence on learners' progress, but to consider that formal tests may not be the most appropriate approach during the early recovery phase (Scottish Government, 2020c). This advice is broadly mirrored in Northern Ireland where

the Department of Education (2020c) advised that teachers should be using formative assessment as a check on pupils' learning, with greater discretion for schools on what to include in school reports when statutory assessment arrangements were suspended.

Analytical reflection

In this study, we used a comparative cross-country study method to gain insights that might not otherwise be apparent from isolated, individual case study analysis (Raffe et al., 1999). Looking to the methodology of "most similar comparisons" (Paterson & Ianelli, 2007, p.332), we recognise the closeness between the national systems of the UK (e.g., based on their shared geographical boundaries, population movement, historical connections, cultural and linguistic links). This closeness means that there is less noise that can account for differences in the comparison of these systems (compared with more dissimilar systems) and enables policy learning (Raffe, 2005, p.2).

Our chosen methodology gives us a clear rationale for systematically gathering curriculum policies and allied documents into a framework. The methodology allowed us to focus on co-occurring issues (e.g., around responses to the COVID-19 pandemic) and to consider convergence and divergence in policy responses across the countries, reasons for these patterns, and whether there are issues of interdependence between the countries' systems. The narrow time frame of our analysis, covering a period of a few months, also allowed us to focus in detail on key aspects of decision-making that would be more difficult to unpack over a longer time frame (see Capano et al., 2020). In the remainder of this section, we detail this article's key thematic findings and conclude with some final methodological reflections.

Divergence in governance styles—but common concerns

As the pandemic has unfolded it has required policymakers to choose between (i) fast response and (ii) delayed response, and in each case balancing sometimes conflicting issues such as protecting public health, ensuring educational access and supporting economic growth. We noted that there is evidence of both rapid decision-making and delayed decision-making. Delays in decision-making can be strategic, as governing bodies await further clarity on the fluid public health situation. We found that differences in consultation styles had an impact on how rapid policy shifts were received by stakeholders.

Cairney (2013) argues that there is an "impressive degree of policy style convergence" (p.8) across the constituent countries of the UK, but our analysis points to several areas of divergence. There are differences in the degree of transparency in stakeholder engagement in policy formation when looking at England compared with the other countries. It is possible that one consequence of the opaqueness of the involvement of multiple voices in policy formation is that it has an impact on reactions to subsequent policy shifts. The reactions of teachers and unions to the alterations to school re-opening dates were largely more negative in England compared with reactions in Wales.

Building on this observation, and aligning with Howlett and Tosun's (2019) assertion that "national policy styles" (p.4) are often evident in policy formulation, our analysis suggests that there are stylistic differences in policy formation and enactment across

the UK countries, with England appearing to exhibit a more "top down" or centralised approach than the other countries. This point is reinforced by Machin et al. (2013) who note that local authorities are more involved in the implementation of education policy in Scotland and Wales compared with England. This difference appears also to be reflected in the differences in the level of prescription in educational guidance, and in the approach to school inspections in England compared with the other countries. These observations lead to tangible insights around how "getting things done" may differ across contexts. For example, it may be suggested that successful policy enactment is more likely to require the involvement of local authorities, unions and professional associations in some contexts compared with others. From a methodological perspective, these insights are a feature of the comparative case study approach that we used in this project, and such insight could potentially be overlooked if analysis focused on any one single national case (Fitzsimons & Johnson, 2020).

Despite these differences, our analysis also allowed us to see some convergence. The common focus across all countries on ensuring that underprivileged learners are a priority for policy is a signifier of a cultural core that underpins the systems. The debate around pupil wellbeing shows some variation in the different countries, but also reflects a largely common discourse around a shared concern. Wellbeing concerns steer the cautious guidance to schools around using formative assessment. These areas of shared focus remind us of the substantive common policy values (Jeffery & Wincott, 2006) that link people across the UK, and which coalesce around things such as attitudes to the welfare state and the National Health Service. In this sense, the composition of the policy mix in the different countries had strong common features.

Complex interdependence

Our study methodology furthermore allows us to consider whether there are issues of interdependence between the countries' systems. The pandemic context makes explicit the common legal frameworks that link the countries' actions. For example, advice around international travel by the UK Government's Foreign and Commonwealth Office in July had an undoubted effect on planning for school trips for all UK countries. The early response to the pandemic demonstrates the degree of organisational coordination that existed across the countries at that time (although this coordination has diminished more recently). Each devolved administration has a Chief Medical Officer (CMO) who works with the CMO to the UK Government to provide coordinated advice to government departments in the four countries. At the beginning of the pandemic, ministers from the devolved administrations also attended meetings of new Ministerial Implementation Groups that were established to look at specific aspects of the coronavirus response.[5]

The degree of interdependence between the devolved systems is also brought into sharp focus by the events around exam grading that occurred in the late summer of 2020 (which fell outside the time frame of consideration for the analyses that we include in this paper). The fallout from the exam grading decisions initially made in Scotland had repercussions on all of the other countries, suggesting that interdependence works in

5 The Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIGs) ceased to operate by early June 2020, and it appears that ministers from the devolved administrations have not been part of the UK Government's cabinet committees that replaced the MIGs (Paun et al., 2020).

other ways than through direct policy collaboration. Interdependence in this sense may also account for some of the fast policy response observed in our analysis, and recalls Boin et al.'s (2018) observation that flexibility and improvisation is a characteristic of decision-making in times of crisis. It also reinforces the need to consider the interconnections that exist in public discourse and public opinion across the borders, that is, looking beyond the connections that exist at policymaking level. Additionally, the influence of powerful stakeholders across national borders is particularly noticeable in a context of complex interdependence. While our analysis focused on evidence of impact on policymaking processes and implemented policies, there is a clear indication that while stakeholder engagement plays a role in the formation of policy "upfront", stakeholder reactions to policy and proposals also feed into the policy cycle from below. In areas of policy decision-making that are still in the balance, such as arrangements for 2021 examinations, stakeholder voices may prove highly influential both within national borders but also in public debate and decision-making in the other countries.

Methodological reflections

Our study reinforces to us the importance of recognising some issues that need to be considered when making comparisons across the UK countries. There are a number of conditions that differ across the countries that can help to explain why there are variances in policy formation and content. For example, there were differences in the extent of physical school closure across the different countries which would be expected to influence the need for curriculum support. The countries are at different stages of their curriculum trajectories (e.g., ranging from being relatively well established in England, to a process of "disestablishing" in Wales) and so have a different relationship to the curriculum.

A criticism of the comparative case study method that we employ for the type of analysis that we have used here is that it involves a degree of trade-off: foregoing a deep analytic focus on one national "case" in order to gain insights from across a broad array of national situations. However, the method utilises a form of analysis that is found across a diverse set of research methods, from Randomised Controlled Trials (RCT) to Ethnography. Where RCTs manipulate variables and look for direct comparison of outcomes in relation to those specific manipulations, Ethnography involves analysts reflecting on the special insights that they gain from possessing both "insider" and "outsider" perspectives. We argue, in line with Raffe and colleagues (1999), that the comparative framework that supports cross-national case study analysis provides useful insights if the overlaps between the chosen cases are sufficiently strong—which appears to be the case across the countries of the UK.

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