Editorial

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This special issue of *The Welsh Journal of Education* reflects on a period that has seen notable changes to the education system in Wales. Its particular focus is on the decade since September 1997 when the electorate in Wales voted in a referendum to set up the National Assembly for Wales and what has since become known as the Welsh Assembly Government. This has been the decade of what has been referred to variously as 'devolution', 'political devolution' and 'parliamentary devolution', famously (and helpfully) identified by one of its main architects, Ron Davies, as being 'a process and not an event … its impact will be on the whole of our public, economic, social and political life' (Davies, 1999: p. 9). That process has deeper historical roots in what Gareth Elwyn Jones has termed 'creeping devolution' (Jones, 2006: p. 271).

The first article, by Gareth Rees, is a useful corrective to the understandable tendency of the Welsh Assembly Government, echoed by some commentators, to portray events since the first National Assembly for Wales was elected in 1999 as a new golden era with initiatives in education supplying much of the shine. The continuities that Rees points to are attributable both to ideology and to the structures of Welsh society. Rees also draws attention to the politics that have shaped policy in numerous ways, from the horizon-scanning of First Minister Rhodri Morgan's 'clear red water' speech of 2002, to the low politics of the opposition parties flexing their newly acquired political muscle by combining to sabotage the recommendations of Teresa Rees's 2005 second review of student support in further and higher education. His conclusion – that the establishment of an Assembly has created the circumstances in which the Welsh Assembly Government has been able to develop distinctive policies based on an explicit vision of Welsh education – sets the scene for the remaining papers

in this collection. The six sector case studies offer an opportunity to test Rees's hypotheses that education policy-making in Wales since 1999 has seen a greater openness, an intensification of the involvement of established groupings but little by way of opening up the policy process to take account of other groups.

If ever a reminder was needed that the history of Wales did not begin in 1999 it can be found in Gareth Elwyn Jones's article on higher education. That the establishment of the University of Wales emerged from a resurgence of national self-esteem in the 1890s is of particular interest at a time when, a century later, a new vehicle for shaping national identity, the National Assembly for Wales, is in its infancy. Jones emphasizes the importance of another 1990s event, the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, as the higher education institutions that were previously funded and controlled by local education authorities became incorporated institutions funded through a national agency, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales. The Welsh Assembly Government was thus taking over responsibility for shaping a higher education system that had already changed, particularly in the decade prior to 1999, out of all recognition from the small group of elite institutions envisaged in 1893.

The article later in this volume by Furlong and colleagues on the reform of teacher education in Wales supplies an illustration of the importance of parliamentary devolution for higher education. On one side of the argument was the Welsh Assembly Government seeking to plan the provision of teacher training places, almost all of it located in higher education, in terms of the projected demand for teachers in Welsh schools. On the other, stood the higher education institutions continuing to argue that higher education in Wales should, for all categories of student, recruit from and respond to the needs of the rest of the UK and beyond. With policy decisions in the hands of the Welsh Assembly Government and the government agency that controls the main funding stream to institutions, the outcome was predictable: an example, as Jones puts it, of 'symbolism being replaced by the practicalities of power'. Jones's account of policy developments since 1999 also draws attention to the way in which, in some areas of education policy, the Assembly's education committees have had a role that has gone beyond scrutiny of government decisions. Yet implementation of the Assembly Government's subsequent vision for the sector, *Reaching Higher*, has proved problematic as institutional interests and UK factors have stalled many of the 'reconfiguration' initiatives favoured by the Assembly Government.

At the other end of the range of age groups for whose formal education the National Assembly has responsibility are the 3- to 7-year-olds. The Foundation Phase developments reported on by Iram Siraj-Blatchford and her colleagues represent the most fundamental of all the policy initiatives reviewed in this collection. As with *Reaching Higher*, the policy seeds were sown by a review that was commissioned by one of the Assembly education committees (see Egan and James, 2001: p. 56). However, unlike the experience in higher education, the Foundation Phase changes are now well on their way to implementation with the Assembly Government's *Action Plan* for roll-out across Wales having been published in December 2006. Siraj-Blatchford and colleagues reveal how external evaluators can, when politicians and officials in government are receptive, influence the way in which broad policy directions such as those set out in the 2003 consultation document can be re-interpreted and modified in the light of the evidence emerging from evaluation of the pilot phase. This is one case where the Assembly Government's aspiration to open up the policy process to a wider range of groups, at least in terms of the gathering of evidence, can be seen in action.

The article on the Welsh Baccalaureate by Mary Hayden and Jeff Thompson reveals both the potential and some of the pitfalls of developing education policies that respond to the distinctive Welsh context. The GCE Advanced level, the highest status award of the qualifications available to the 14 to 19 age group, has been in place since 1951 and has been, from the 1960s onwards, the target for numerous ultimately unsuccessful attempts to reform it. Already primed by the Institute of Welsh Affairs 1993 proposals for a Welsh Baccalaureate, there was an appetite for reform in the Welsh Assembly Government. At the same time, the Assembly Government had to be mindful that the qualifications taken by students in the 14 to 19 age group must be recognized not only in Wales but also in the UK and beyond. As with so much else in education policy in Wales since 1999, the Welsh Baccalaureate has been germinating within Wales but with the policy-makers keeping at least one eye on the wider context that may ultimately determine its successful growth.

Hayden and Thompson's account of the Baccalaureate model that is now being developed and introduced, initially at Advanced level, tells us a lot about the policy-making process during the Assembly Government's first two terms. It is significant that both the internal evaluation of the developments, by the authors, and the subsequent external evaluation have been led by education academics from outside Wales. As observers looking

in on education policy in Wales from outside they draw attention to the features of the policy process that are also identified elsewhere in this collection, such as the closeness of interactions amongst education professionals in Wales and the importance of consistent support from a minister in office for an unusually lengthy period. Their conclusion is an encouraging one, both for the Welsh Baccalaureate in particular and for the policy development process in Wales more generally, that the Welsh Baccalaureate has every chance of becoming established as a model from which other education policy developers have much to learn.

Martin Jephcote and Jane Salisbury's article is an account of recent policy developments affecting the further education sector in Wales. They chart the numerous changes, both to national (England and Wales) qualifications and to organizational arrangements, that have occurred in that sector. Though the period since parliamentary devolution has seen major structural changes at the all-Wales level, they argue it would be unwise to overstate the significance of responsibility for the sector having moved since 1999 from London to Cardiff. In further education the most important of organizational changes in recent years occurred in 1993 when, following the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, further education colleges were taken out of local authority control and became incorporated bodies. The impact of college managements' responses to the organizational model to which college incorporation was central – the 'long shadow' of their title – just as much to the fore in Jephcote and Salisbury's reports of interviews in 2005/6 with college lecturers as it is, more understandably, in their evidence from interviews with college principals in 1994. The evidence of responses to change at the grassroots level in FE highlights the importance of recognizing that national policies manifest themselves in different ways when they are mediated by the practitioners who are responsible for implementing them.

John Furlong, Hazel Hagger and Cerys Butcher, reflecting on their review of initial teacher training (ITT) in Wales, offer a perspective on the role of independent reviews in policy development that cautions against portraying the policy process in Wales in unduly positive terms. The authors' attempts to think long term about the quality and nature of the ITT sector were not to be supported by the minister and her officials. Instead, both the review's terms of reference and the Government's response to its final report were strongly influenced by the urgent need, for demographic reasons, to scale down the level of provision for the training of new teachers for schools in Wales. It is not, however, only the particular policy priorities in the ITT

sector that can be seen to have to have shaped that review process. What emerges from this account by Furlong and his colleagues is a different way, distinct from those reported on by Hayden and Thompson and by Daugherty, of involving academic specialists in the process of policy development within government. Hayden and Thompson were drawn into the policy process as internal evaluators of a pilot scheme; Daugherty was invited by the minister to lead a review on terms that were negotiated, enlisting the help of a group that would be fully involved in, and party to, the framing of the review's recommendations. In contrast, Furlong and his colleagues were commissioned (in response to a formal invitation to tender), with the main features of the work to be undertaken having already been specified, and their support group, over the composition of which they had only partial control, had an advisory role.

What conclusions can be drawn about recent education policy-making in Wales from the case studies reported on and discussed here? Parliamentary devolution has offered a new environment in which to articulate social and cultural values such as the 'six principles of social justice' that Drakeford suggests underpin the Assembly Government's approach to policy (Drakeford, 2007: p. 4). But, as Drakeford argues, those principles are a legacy of the social and economic impact of the Industrial Revolution. Thus one theme running through this collection is the continuities that can be traced back through forty years of administrative devolution and beyond to the social and economic roots of society in Wales today. Yet, for all the acknowledged continuities, it would be foolish to underestimate the extent to which the early years of the new century have seen the start of a fundamental reshaping of the education system in Wales. The policy-making system within the Assembly Government, small in scale and accustomed to recontextualizing London-generated policies, has been responding since 1999 to wide-ranging proposals for more distinctive Wales-specific forms of provision.

How has the policy process coped with the demands of several ambitious initiatives on a broad front? One thing that is clear, not only from the case studies in this collection but from others that have been reported elsewhere, is that there is no one policy-development model shaping the way policies have been initiated, developed and implemented. Some of the case studies (Assessment, Teacher Education) are reporting on a 'blueprint and recommendations' approach to policy development while others (Foundation Phase, Baccalaureate) are describing a 'develop, pilot and adapt' approach. Several (Foundation Phase, Assessment, Baccalaureate) reveal how academic

researchers have contributed their expertise to taking forward policy initiatives in areas where the general direction of change was both relatively clear and politically uncontentious. It is these cases that the minister responsible for education policies in Wales throughout the period in question, Jane Davidson, has been happy to use to illustrate her commitment to 'evidence-informed policy'. There are, however, other areas of policy where the influence of evidence, however defined, on policy is not obvious. Jephcote and Salisbury's account of the further education sector not only points up the significance for policy of 1990s legislation other than the first Government of Wales Act. They reveal a plethora of organizational and other changes in the sector that were certainly not the outcome of a careful, considered review of all the available evidence. In higher education it is also ironic that recent policy developments, as reported here by Gareth Elwyn Jones, are less well grounded in evidence than might have been hoped for, at least by those who are not familiar with that sector's tendency to abandon rational consideration of evidence when looking in on itself.

Taken together, the case studies remind us that policy development within government cannot, and arguably should not, be an exercise in the careful marshalling of evidence leading to the adoption of a self-evidently superior set of conclusions. Policy decisions never are like that: they are always conditioned by the politics of the situation. That is as true of decision-making within organizations such as schools and universities as it is of policy decisions taken at a national level that impact upon the system as a whole. Teresa Rees's second review of student finance, and the minister's welcoming of its recommendations, reached the Assembly at just the time that the opposition parties were newly in a majority and party political horse-trading ensued. More recently, the Furlong recommendations for initial teacher education in Wales, as firmly based on evidence as anyone could wish for but more radical than some interest groups wanted, were shelved. When evidence-informed policy proposals come up against political realities the strength of their evidence base is of little consequence.

This special issue has been published as the National Assembly for Wales embarks on its third term. For some observers the potential for political realignment in the Assembly Government offers another opportunity to add to the agenda for change (IWA, 2006: p. 98) whilst also warning that the time has come to go beyond the rhetoric of 'wish lists' like *Learning Country 2* (WAG, 2006) which 'joins the plethora of Assembly Government documents that have multiple visions but no apparent means of delivering them' (IWA, 2006: p. 116). Looking more broadly across all areas of Assembly

Government policy, the Institute of Welsh Affairs reports that the commonest complaints from its policy groups have been 'that the strategic documents do not always address delivery issues, that there is often an "implementation gap", that the institutional structures … are not fit for purpose' (IWA, 2006: p. 8).

Whatever strengths or weaknesses become apparent in the Welsh policy system as the focus moves on from the formulation and development of policies to their implementation, it is inevitable that the first two terms of the National Assembly will in time be judged not in terms of the policy process but, as Gareth Rees concluded in the first article in this collection, in terms of the educational outcomes. Arguably, the greatest challenge ahead is to escape the trap of relying on familiar performance indicators as the sole basis for judging the success of an education system that has set out a new, distinct vision of its future. What are to be, as Rees has put it, the 'other kinds of outcome' in relation to which Wales should judge the realization of its *Learning Country* dream?

References

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