

National Curriculum Assessment in Wales: Evidence-informed Policy?

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ABSTRACT

This account of a review of the statutory arrangements for assessing pupils at ages 11 and 14 in Wales explains how, drawing on evidence from a variety of sources, recommendations for changes to policies on assessment were put forward to the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning in 2004. The way policies in this area were developed is analysed. Following a discussion of what this case study reveals about the process of policy development in the new circumstances created by the establishment of a National Assembly for Wales and a Welsh Assembly Government, the article concludes by identifying some of salient features of the policy process. These include the ideological roots of the Assembly Government's vision of a 'Learning Country', a greater openness in both evidence-gathering and decision-making, and new mechanisms for the review and development of policy.

Introduction

The mantra of 'evidence-informed policy' has been much quoted in the UK for nearly a decade now, part of the developing discourse concerning the relationship between the policy process within government and the evidence that, in principle at least, has relevance to policy-making. But what does 'evidence-informed policy' mean in practice when those who are actively involved in policy-making in education at a national level frame the policy decisions that help shape our education system? In this article analysis and discussion of a review, chaired by the author, of assessment policies forms

Richard Daugherty 69

the basis for provisional conclusions about the process of policy development in Wales in the new circumstances created by the establishment of a National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) in 1999.

There have been important changes in the ways in which education policies in Wales have been developed over the past two decades. As a broader historical perspective clearly demonstrates, policy development has for the most part reflected the realities of 'Wales as an addendum in the "England and Wales" state' (Jones and Roderick, 2003: vii). As recently as 1987 the formulation of the distinctively Welsh features of the curriculum provisions within the 1988 Education Act has been characterized by Daugherty and Elfed-Owens (2003) as being the product of a 'small group of policy actors' within the Welsh Office. That small group with influence over policy decisions was recontextualizing policies that had been formulated in a process that was 'England-based and London-centred' (Fitz, 2000: 25).

And yet even in the 1990s, while UK Government control of education in England and Wales was being exerted to an extent that would have been unimaginable a decade earlier, education policy-making in Wales was moving into a phase where a process of 'administrative devolution' ensured that the influences on policy from within Wales would grow. This is what Jones refers to as the paradox that, 'because of state involvement rather than in spite of it, educational devolution has increased, gathering pace after the Second World War' (Jones, 2004: 5). Divergence of education policies in Wales and England during the 1990s is evident across several aspects and phases of education (Daugherty, Phillips and Rees, 2000). These trends are seen by Jones as marking the emergence of 'a new model of control and influence made possible only by the history of Welsh distinctiveness' (ibid.: 9).

The first seven years of parliamentary devolution have inevitably brought further changes to the policy system in Wales. The questions that arise concern not whether education policy-making has changed but rather to what extent and to what effect. Education is one of the main areas in which responsibilities for policy have been devolved to the National Assembly for Wales. Successive Assembly administrations since 1999 have seen it as an area in which, as the First Minister has put it, the Assembly can establish 'clear red water . . . between the way in which things are being shaped in Wales and the direction being followed for equivalent services in England' (Morgan, 2002). Publication in 2001 of *The Learning Country* by the Assembly Government was a significant step for the new administration, setting out its own agenda for the future of education in Wales. Such a

National Curriculum Assessment in Wales: Evidence-informed Policy?

'paving document' could not map out the detail of the policies required to realize the vision of what the Education Minister, Jane Davidson, refers to in her foreword as a vision of making 'Wales an unbeatable place to learn'. *The Learning Country* was, after all, 'not a blueprint but a series of position statements' (Daugherty and Jones, 2002: 112). But it set the broad direction in which a Labour-led administration would, subject to the wishes of the electorate at four-yearly intervals, wish to develop education policy in Wales. And, in doing so, it established an agenda that, in substance as well as in its discourse, identifies a direction of change distinct from that being set for England at the same time (Phillips and Harper-Jones, 2003).

Statutory assessment: the policy context

The National Assembly for Wales inherited a statutory assessment system legislated for in the 1988 Education Act for pupils in state-funded schools in England and Wales between the ages of 5 and 14. The era of administrative devolution had seen assessment policies in Wales becoming distinctive in relatively minor though important ways (Daugherty, 2000). For example, Welsh Office Ministers did not introduce the performance tables of the test results of each primary school, a policy that is still highly contentious in England more than a decade later.

The first substantial step towards distinctive statutory assessment arrangements with the Minister's announcement in 2001 that the standard tests and tasks (commonly referred to as 'SATs') taken by 7-year-olds at the end of Key Stage 1 in the core subjects of the National Curriculum would be phased out in Wales. The reporting of pupils' achievements in the four core subjects (English, Welsh, Mathematics, Science) would, from 2002, depend on teachers' assessments of their pupils' attainments. It was a policy decision, seemingly without a long gestation period and certainly not preceded by a lengthy public debate, that was almost universally welcomed in Wales, above all by teachers' representatives who had long campaigned against what they saw as national tests that had no clear educational purpose. The Education Act of 2002 had made it possible for that decision to be taken by the Welsh Assembly Government.

The 2002 Act meant that the Assembly Government in Wales could also change any other aspects of the National Curriculum in Wales and the associated assessments, but the Government did not move immediately to propose any such changes. Instead, as part of its remit from the Assembly, the

Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (a quango usually known by its acronym in Welsh – ACCAC) was asked in 2002 to undertake a wide-ranging review of the school curriculum and assessment and to report to the Minister in April 2004. Though the scope of the review was broader and more open than earlier curriculum reviews in Wales carried out by ACCAC and its predecessors (ACAC, CCW), the process of periodic policy review by the responsible quango had become established in the new era of central control of curriculum and assessment inaugurated by the 1988 Act. ACCAC duly gathered all the evidence available to it, consulted with interested parties and put forward its recommendations, covering both curriculum and assessment, in a report to the Minister in April 2004 (ACCAC, 2004).

The decision to review

In June 2003, however, the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, Jane Davidson, decided to establish in addition a separate but parallel review that would focus more narrowly on statutory assessment at Key Stages 2 and 3 (pupils aged from 7 to 14 years). Why she chose to move to open up her policy options in that area in this way was not made explicit but the threat of a boycott in 2004 of the Key Stage 2 SATs by the largest teaching union, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), in both Wales and England was no doubt one factor in her moving more quickly to consider policy changes in this area than the agreed timetable of the ACCAC Review would allow for. The author of this article was invited to set up a group that would review all the available evidence and submit its recommendations directly to the Minister. Whilst the Minister and her officials would have preferred a shorter timescale, a schedule was agreed that involved an Interim Report completed by December 2003 and a Final Report by the end of March 2004.

The way in which the assessment review was carried out had several distinguishing features. First, the author was responding to a personal invitation from the Minister to chair a group that would inform Assembly policy in this area. Secondly, the group's remit was negotiated with the Chair rather than being determined by the Minister and her officials. Thirdly, discussions between the Chair and the Assembly official seconded to the review ensured that the composition of the review group was acceptable to both. Fourthly, unusually in this new era of policy development in Wales, what became known as the Daugherty Review would be concurrent with a

National Curriculum Assessment in Wales: Evidence-informed Policy?

review which the Minister had already commissioned from the relevant statutory advisory body, ACCAC.

In announcing the review the Minister portrayed it as another example of the Assembly Government's commitment to evidence-informed policy. But how should an *ad hoc* group of education practitioners, administrators and researchers go about giving effect to policy recommendations that are 'evidence-informed'? What should count as evidence, where would we look for it and how should the group go about analysing and evaluating it? There were no rule books or even notes of guidance to follow, either from within the Assembly Government system or, so far as we were aware, available from elsewhere. Indeed the Minister and her officials were, the group's remit having been agreed, scrupulous about not seeking to influence either how it might go about its work or which possible alternatives to the current assessment system the group might want to consider.

*The evidence**Collecting evidence*

The Daugherty Assessment Review Group was assembled by invitation over the summer of 2003 and comprised, in addition to the Chair, four practitioners (two class teachers and two headteachers), a parent governor and four individuals in various administrative roles in education in Wales, three of them at the national level, one within a local education authority. It was supported by two officials from what was then the National Assembly Training and Education Department of the Welsh Assembly Government plus a part-time research officer.

It was clear from the outset that the review group had neither the time nor the funding to commission the collection of fresh empirical evidence directly relevant to its remit. It would not therefore be initiating 'use-inspired research' of the kind advocated by Feuer and Smith (2004) in their report for the National Educational Research Forum (NERF) in England. Instead it set itself the more modest target of trying to ensure, by whatever means, that it would gather every piece of evidence (however defined) that was potentially of relevance to its remit. Then, that evidence having been collected, each group member would read it and, through discussion, the group would come to a shared view of its significance.

The effective conduct of the review required the group to look for evidence that related to assessment at Key Stages 2 and 3 in two distinct

ways. First, it needed to be able to evaluate aspects of current practice within schools, and relating to schools (for example, in the use of assessment data), that were attributable to the statutory assessment arrangements. This was the task of *evaluating* the current assessment system and its impact on learning and teaching. Secondly, it would have to consider each of several alternative policy options before we could put forward, in an evidence-informed way, recommendations for future policy. That was the *policy development* dimension to the work, one where the group could be expected to explore such evidence as was available, from other policy environments and from expert analysis, about policy options. Any reformulated system would have to be designed as a coherent set of system components and so, by definition, there could be no direct evidence as to its hoped-for positive impact on learning and teaching.

The review group solicited evidence in two main ways. It followed the conventional consultation route used by central government and its agencies and wrote to a wide range of representative organizations in Wales inviting them to submit evidence from their perspective. At the same time, through press publicity and through a response facility on the Assembly's website, any individual or organization wishing to submit evidence was encouraged to send in comments. Respondents were asked the same two basic questions through both these channels:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses, in terms of the purposes of National Curriculum assessment, of the current arrangements at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3? [the *evaluative* question]
- What alternative arrangements might better serve those purposes (a) at Key Stage 2 and (b) at Key Stage 3? [the *policy development* question]

The broad nature of such prompts clearly begs more fundamental questions inherent in the group's remit, such as what exactly is meant by 'the purposes of National Curriculum assessment'. But it also allowed any respondent, from a parent concerned about her children's education to a researcher immersed in the complexities of the system, to submit whatever he or she judged to be relevant evidence.

Chapter 2 of the Final Report of the Daugherty Assessment Review Group (Daugherty et al., 2004) summarizes the evidence in terms of the source constituencies from which the evidence derived, such as 'teachers', 'local authorities' and 'national organizations'. Every item of evidence in each category was to be accessible via the online version of the Final Report at the National Assembly's website, www.learning.wales.gov.uk.

National Curriculum Assessment in Wales: Evidence-informed Policy?

Evidence from individuals

Much of the evidence took the form of testimony from individuals, relating personal experiences of the testing regime in Welsh schools. The largest volume of such individual responses came from pupils. Some were unsolicited, while others were received following an approach to secondary schools by the review's secretariat asking them for their help in eliciting the views of pupils through School Councils. There was no basis for interpreting those responses as being representative of all pupils in Wales who had experience of the SATs, either in Year 6 or in Year 9, but the diversity of pupil opinion was brought home to review group members. Some pupils said they had found the experience of being tested positive and a useful preparation for a lifetime of being examined whilst others picked up on the stressfulness of tests, the learning time lost and the worries about being labelled a 'level x child'.

Evidence from interest groups

All national organizations and representative bodies in Wales with an interest in the education system were written to and invited to respond to the group's remit and to the two questions. The response was patchy, with only the organizations representing teachers (see below) giving full voice to their views. Especially disappointing was the almost complete absence of considered responses not only from all-Wales organizations that might have voiced a view from outside the education system looking in but also of key constituencies closer to the testing regime and its impact on schools, such as parents and school governors. This interest group evidence also presents problems of interpretation in that few of those responding made explicit the basis on which the response was drawn up. Were their members consulted? There may have been insufficient time for that. Was the response that was submitted prepared after discussion within the organization's committees? Or did it represent the opinions of one senior officer who had been asked to reflect the organization's interests in the response that he or she would draft?

Submissions from education professionals formed the largest sub-section of the evidence from groups. In addition to written evidence from those sources a witness session was arranged at which organizations representing teachers commented on their evidence and responded to questions. Some organizations rehearsed familiar critiques of National Curriculum testing, without any empirical evidence offered in support, but others quoted from

research evidence and/or explored in some detail their preferred alternatives. In this part of its evidence base the review group was experiencing a familiar dilemma for those engaged in policy development. How to take due account of the professional experience and expertise of the organizations representing members who are 'closest to the action' in terms of statutory assessment and its impact without what has been pejoratively termed the 'producer interest' becoming too strongly represented in the formulation of policy? The Conservative Government responsible for the introduction of National Curriculum assessment was so suspicious of 'producer interest' that the teacher voice was often ignored (there were only two schoolteachers among the fifteen members of the *School Examinations and Assessment Council* in the late 1980s) and the genuine professional concerns of many teachers were not taken account of. In 2003/4 in Wales, with four of the ten review group members being teachers and a strong teacher voice in the evidence received, there was no danger of that happening. But there was a danger that, if teachers were the only group from which a considerable body of evidence was received, the review group's thinking might be over-influenced by the teacher voice.

Evidence from assessment specialists

The review group also wanted to draw on available specialist expertise in assessment and so a further category of evidence from outside the group comprised assessment experts. Six of the review group's eight witness sessions involved asking one or more individuals with such expertise to range across the group's remit and to offer any comments or advice they wished from their own knowledge of assessment matters. The individuals were based in organizations within Wales (local authority assessment advisers), across England and Wales (the National Foundation for Educational Research), in UK universities (London, Bristol) and in international organizations (the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). Rather than being expected to offer an evaluation of the current statutory assessment system in Wales or to offer alternatives these individuals fulfilled the role of conditioning the review group's thinking on what could be learned from experience to date and the issues to be considered in any reformulation of the system in Wales.

Such were the types of evidence received in the course of the review from individuals and organizations outside the review process. What did the review group do to elicit evidence from other sources? The fact that it was

National Curriculum Assessment in Wales: Evidence-informed Policy?

not possible to commission the gathering of new empirical evidence has already been mentioned but there were other sources that the group could draw on – survey reports from public bodies in Wales, summaries of other available evidence, and academic research that, in one way or another, touched upon the group’s remit.

Survey evidence

The most obvious sources of *survey reports* were the schools inspectorate in Wales, Estyn, and the body responsible to the National Assembly for qualifications, curriculum and assessment in Wales, ACCAC, both of which routinely engage in surveys of the system. Among the publications from Estyn that the review group drew upon were recent *Annual Reports* of the Chief Inspector (who was also a member of the review group) and a study, published jointly with the Welsh Assembly Government and ACCAC, of *Moving On – Effective Transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3* (Estyn, 2004a). From ACCAC came survey evidence commissioned from the PPI Group (2003) as part of ACCAC’s review of curriculum and assessment. In addition to these reports, parts of which referred directly to aspect of the remit, was a series of Welsh Assembly Government policy papers, such as *The Learning Country: Foundation Phase 3–7 years* (WAG, 2003), familiarity with which enabled the review group to put its own focus on the seven to fourteen key stages into the wider context of the Welsh Assembly Government’s assessment policies.

In the absence of fresh empirical evidence focused on the review questions such reports from public bodies were the best alternative sources of evidence available. For example, the *Moving On* report was timely in illuminating current practices in relation to the transition of pupils from primary to secondary school, a central feature of the group’s remit. Also, the ACCAC *Survey* document, which reported the views of primary and secondary teachers in Wales on the current assessment regime, supplied some helpful, if rough, triangulation when set alongside the views of teachers that were reported by the organizations representing them. However, the limitations of such evidence must also be acknowledged. It was obtained and written up at a time and in the form that necessarily reflected the needs of those organizations. Publication of *Moving On* was timely but the review group was not able to take account of an Estyn report on the impact on schools of the abolition of Key Stage 1 tests from 2002 (Estyn, 2004b) because that report was published only after the review group had completed its work. And the form of reporting that is characteristic of an

organization such as Estyn, with general conclusions prominent but much of the evidence base not explicit, is not as helpful as it might be for a group that is committed to an exercise in 'evidence-informed policy'.

On a modest scale the review group was also able, through its research officer and the secretariat, to ask for summaries of other available evidence on topics that emerged as being significant. A series of such reports – on the assessment of pupils with special educational needs, on legal considerations that apply to statutory assessments, on published evidence about (UK) pupils' views on their experience of being assessed, on international systems of student assessment and on the nature of non-statutory assessment systems being used by schools in the UK – helped to inform the group's thinking.

Evidence from research

With an academic chairing the review group, evidence from academic research might be expected to figure prominently. However, it was clear to the review group from the outset that there was no significant body of academic research that addressed, in the Welsh context, the themes of its remit. Two small-scale recent studies in Wales were reported to the group but there was no substantive body of evidence from empirical research relating to Wales and written up in the academic literature. The evaluations of assessment policy and practice in Wales that had been commissioned by government agencies during the 1990s and undertaken by academics (for example Thompson et al., 1996; Harlen et al., 1998) also had little to offer to a review that was seeking to evaluate the situation in 2003 and to look ahead from there. This paucity of timely academic research on assessment practices and policies in Wales meant that there was little scope for such research evidence to have a central role either in relation to policy evaluation or to policy development. The influence of academic research on the group's thinking would be mainly indirect, for example through a 'reading list' of academic literature which formed a common basis for the group to consider the wider issues as understood by academic specialists in assessment.

There were, however, two important exceptions. First, one of the main recommendations would be that 'assessment for learning' practices should be more widely adopted in school classrooms across Wales. The review by Black and Wiliam on 'Assessment and classroom learning', published in the journal *Assessment in Education* (Black and Wiliam, 1998a) and made more widely known through an associated pamphlet (Black and Wiliam, 1998b), is a notable example of a piece of academic research permeating the discourse

National Curriculum Assessment in Wales: Evidence-informed Policy?

of both policy and practice in the UK. The review group was therefore able with some confidence to draw on respected academic research in framing its recommendation 23: 'The development of assessment for learning practices should be a central feature of a programme for development in Wales of curriculum and assessment.'

Secondly, the group would recommend that moderated teacher assessments should become the main sources of evidence for reporting on pupils' attainments at the end of Key Stages 2 and 3. The evidence from academic sources that was relevant to the review's remit in this respect also derived from a review of research rather than from a specific piece of empirical work. In this instance the review in question was undertaken during 2003 under the auspices of the EPPI Centre at the Institute of Education in London by Harlen on behalf of the Assessment and Learning Research Synthesis Group (Harlen, 2004). Harlen presented her main findings to the review group ahead of publication of the full report which is available on the website of EPPI Centre at: <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk> The review group was therefore able to draw on research evidence to guide it as to how a greater emphasis on teacher assessment would need to be interpreted and implemented if such assessments were to become the only source for reporting on pupil attainment at the end of Key Stages 2 and 3.

Discussion

This process of policy review and development illustrates some of the more general questions that arise in 'evidence-based' policy-making. The focus here is on what can be learned from this case study about the claims for an evidence-based policy process in Wales in the new circumstances that have emerged since 1999.

First, there was inevitably a political context for this review but it did not have the effect of either constraining the review group in its work or distorting the outcomes. Policy decisions on statutory assessment were not especially urgent in political terms, nor were the possible outcomes of the review constrained either by the manifesto commitments of the governing Labour Party or by a political steer from the Minister responsible. The issues being addressed in the review were also relatively uncontentious in party political terms in Wales, as was subsequently confirmed by the muted response of the opposition parties to the Minister's acceptance of the review's recommendations. Two of the three opposition parties were on record as

favouring radical changes in the National Curriculum assessment regime and the fourth party, the Conservatives, was for the most part acquiescent rather than openly hostile to change.

Secondly, the way in which the review was undertaken reveals something of the nature of relationships amongst individuals and agencies in Wales. Here was a group charged with developing policy that comprised an unusual mix of individuals from both outside and within the national agencies with responsibilities in this area. Yes, it included an academic in the chair, four teachers and a parent governor. But other members included the Chief Inspector, the Chief Executive of the statutory agency responsible for advising the Welsh Assembly Government and a senior civil servant in the Assembly's Training and Education Department. The group also had the relative luxury in policy development terms of a period of eight months in which to assemble evidence, analyse it and draw conclusions.

Thirdly, other factors worked in the review group's favour, helping it to consider the available evidence in its own time and on its own terms and then to relate that evidence to the policy context in Wales. For example, issues involving assessment and testing in schools are not in Wales presented in the media in the tendentious way that characterizes such reporting in England (Warmington and Murphy, 2004).

Put another way, if one or more of these factors had been adverse – perhaps political imperatives in terms of timing or direction, party political conflict, or a hostile media – giving effect to the aspiration of evidence-informed policy development would have presented more of a challenge.

It is clear from this case study that the working through in practice of evidence-informed policy can only be understood in terms of the particular social, cultural and political context for policy evaluation and development. That understanding has been clear enough to academics researching education policy in Scotland (for example, Humes, 1997), but has seldom been acknowledged in the English debates about the relationship between research and policy where there has been perhaps too little recognition that such relationships are strongly coloured by the distinctive features of the policy environment in England.

Conclusion

A striking feature of the policy environment in Wales in the era of parliamentary devolution has been the explicitness of its ideological roots in

National Curriculum Assessment in Wales: Evidence-informed Policy?

traditional Labour Party values, as distinct from the 'New Labour' ideas associated with the 'Blairist' policies of the UK Government. *The Learning Country* confidently asserts the principles on which the development of the education system in Wales would be based, such as a commitment to 'non-selective, comprehensive school provision' (p. 25). Teresa Rees, in summarizing the work of her investigation into student finance refers to the process of review as 'an exercise in evidence-based policy development, framed by principles focused on equality, inclusion and the development of skills for the Welsh economy' (Rees, 2002: 12). And the remit for the review of assessment that was agreed by the Minister, her officials and the author contains a number of value-laden statements expressed in terms of a progressive educational ideology such as the encouragement to the review group to suggest 'how assessment should be used to enable the whole child to develop and flourish' (Daugherty et al., 2004: 41).

Another feature of the policy environment in Wales in recent years is a greater openness in the policy-making process, in marked contrast to the 'small group of policy actors' within the Welsh Office who shaped National Curriculum policy in the late 1980s (Deacon, 2002). As Gareth Rees (2004) argues, 'it is clear that the new mechanisms through which policy-making occurs provided a vehicle through which [certain] social groupings within civil society were able to exert important influences over the policy-making process in ways which had not been possible under administrative devolution'. Rees cautions that 'it is the established groupings which have exerted the critical influences over the development of policy initiatives, rather than the views of the wider electorate' (see also Rees in this volume). The assessment review of 2003/4 illustrates how, in the absence of effective mechanisms for taking account of the views of the wider electorate, the influence of the insiders who have always taken an active interest in policy – politicians, civil servants, LEAs, professional organizations – is likely to be strong.

The mechanisms for policy review and development that have been adopted by the Welsh Assembly Government have other distinctive features that set them apart, not just from the equivalent mechanisms in England but also from those in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Where else in the UK would a policy review group include such significant figures in the education system as the Chief Inspector of Schools or the Chief Executive of the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority as group members in their own right with a shared commitment to achieving a consensus on future directions? It is interesting to note that reviews of

assessment policies carried out in Scotland and Northern Ireland over the same period each had their own distinct organizational features in terms of the process of policy review. For example, though couched very much in terms of 'partnership' and involving wide consultation, the development of policy on assessment for pupils from 3 to 14 in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2003) was led by officials within the Scottish Executive. The review of curriculum and assessment at Key Stage 3 in Northern Ireland has seen the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, also intent upon commitment to 'working with all the partners in education', in a lead role (CCEA, 2003).

In the case study reported here of policy development in Wales there are encouraging signs that the Welsh Assembly's commitment to drawing on the available evidence when reviewing and developing policies in education is being sustained as it works through *The Learning Country* agenda. However, the more difficult challenges inherent in the idea of evidence-informed policy have yet to be faced. It is also ironic that, while the Assembly administration is drawing on the academic research expertise of individuals currently in post in Welsh HEIs, the academic research base in education in Wales, already tactfully described by Furlong and White (2001) as 'not strong', is being further weakened by structural changes triggered by policy pressures in relation to research funding and institutional reorganization (Daugherty, 2003).

But there can be no doubt that the policy process in Wales has moved on over a period of fifteen years from being in the hands of a small group of officials and politicians to a more open and democratic form of policy formulation. That represents a significant development over the final years of administrative devolution and into the early years of parliamentary devolution. And yet the policy agenda is still a daunting one for a small country with limited resources, inside and outside government, if it is to be able to manage successfully all the necessary stages of policy evaluation, formulation, development and implementation.

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National Curriculum Assessment in Wales: Evidence-informed Policy?

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