

Politics and Evidence-based Policy-making: the Review of Initial Teacher Training Provision in Wales

JOHN FURLONG
University of Oxford

HAZEL HAGGER
University of Oxford

CERYS FURLONG
NIACE Dysgu Cymru

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to contribute to a greater understanding of the role of evidence in the policy process. It does so through a retrospective analysis of an 'Independent Review' commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government – the Review of Initial Teacher Training Provision in Wales. Over the last 5 years, the Welsh Assembly Government has commissioned a number of such reviews; their appeal to policy-makers, it is argued, is that they appear to understand outside the political process, giving policy advice based on rational evidence rather than ideology or sectional interest. However, through their retrospective account, the authors support Shulock's (1999) view that there is a paradox in policy analysis, arising from a mismatch between notions of how the policy process should work and its actual messy, uncertain, unstable and essentially political realities. To illustrate their argument, they focus on three 'moments' in their policy review – the setting up of the review; the way in which they attempted to engage the higher education sector in Wales in the review process; and, finally, how their recommendations were responded to. They conclude by arguing that all

research is partial and policy-based research is no different. Facing up to those contradictions and tensions in the process is, they argue, an important step in assessing the real value of incorporating independent reviews of this sort within a modern democratic state.

Introduction

The mantra of 'evidence-based policy-making' has been one of the hallmarks of British politics since the election of New Labour in 1997. It emerged 'somewhere on the journey from Opposition to Government' (Solesbury 2001) finding its first full expression in the 1999 White Paper *Modernising Government*.

At the level of rhetoric at least, the evidence-based policy movement is about challenging old strategies for policy formation, based as they were either on ideology or elites. This aspiration is well captured by Solesbury (2001) of the ESRC UK Centre for Evidence-based Policy and Practice, when he writes:

there is something new in the air which gives both a fresh urgency and a new twist to the issues around evidence-based policy. To my mind the key factor is the shift in the nature of politics; the retreat from ideology, the dissolution of class-based party politics, the empowerment of consumers. (9)

The rhetorical appeal of social science in providing part of the evidential base for policy is therefore that it can be seen as scientific. It purports to stand outside the political process, giving policy advice based on rational evidence rather than ideology or sectional interest.

Significantly, the growing interest in the evidence-based movement has not been confined to England. Wales, with its newly achieved democratic devolution, has also embraced the role of evidence in the development of policy. In an early policy speech in December 2002, the First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, referred to a 'new pluralism' in policy-making in Wales with the Welsh Assembly seeking a broader engagement with civil society in Wales. And in the field of education, Jane Davidson, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, in her most recent policy document has stated:

Over the last five years we have drawn both on practitioner expertise and high quality educational research. We commission independent evaluations of all our major policy initiatives. Leading research bodies have complimented us on this approach. [We] will continue to operate in this way. (NAfW, 2006a)

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However, in one regard, the position of Wales is profoundly different from that of England and that is in relation to educational research capacity. As Furlong and White (2001) demonstrated early in the life of the new Assembly, research capacity in the field of education is extremely weak. Unlike England, or indeed Scotland, the Welsh Assembly Government's aspiration for research-based evidence is not matched by the capacity of higher education or indeed any other bodies within Wales to provide that evidence through conventional social science.

It is perhaps for this reason that, rather than commissioning significant amounts of formal research, over the last five years, the Welsh Assembly Government has adopted a different strategy for assembling relevant evidence for its policy development. That strategy has been the commissioning of 'independent reviews'. So far there have been a number of independent reviews in education in Wales, for example, on student fees (T. Rees, 2002, 2005), on assessment (Daugherty et al., 2004) and on part-time higher education (Graham, 2006). Each review has been commissioned to focus on a key area of policy within the Welsh educational agenda. The focus of this paper is on one further independent review: The Review of Initial Teacher Training Provision in Wales, which was led by the current authors.

But if such reviews are a key means by which research and other evidence is assembled on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government, it is important to understand how they work. Each has had a common structure. They have been chaired by an independent academic and have worked with a support group representing both lay and expert opinion from different relevant communities. Each has also demonstrated a strong commitment to the broadest possible consultation within Wales.

The processes involved are therefore rather different from conventional policy research. For one thing, what counts as 'evidence' is more broadly conceived. There is also an explicit expectation that reviews will themselves move on from evidence to policy recommendations; in this regard, they go further than conventional social scientific research.

But despite these differences, we can see that in many ways the aim of such reviews, particularly from the policy-makers' point of view, is similar to commissioned research. Their appeal is that they appear to be at one and the same time both democratic, consulting a wide cross-section of opinion, and 'independent'; in this sense they may be seen as sidestepping politics, moving policy making beyond ideology or sectional interest.

But is this actually how such reviews work; are they really 'independent'; are they really rational and scientific, standing outside politics? So far we

have had two retrospective accounts of these Welsh Reviews – one on the first Rees Review (T. Rees, 2002 and Stroud, 2002) and one on the Assessment Review (Daugherty, 2004 and in this volume). Both of these retrospective accounts present themselves as success stories and as being entirely rationally based; they therefore continue the ‘story’ of rational evidence-based policy-making. And while we could tell a similar story about our own review, in this paper we want to do something different. We want to highlight some of the complex political processes that went on in and around it, processes which suggest that it was anything but outside the political arena. In this sense we would like our retrospective account to contribute to the growing literature on how research and policy processes actually interrelate. We want to contribute to a greater understanding of what Shulock (1999) calls the ‘paradox of policy analysis’, a paradox arising from ‘a mismatch between notions of how the policy process should work and its actual messy, uncertain, unstable and essentially political realities’ (p. 218).

Our experience is that the review process, just as any other strategy for assembling evidence, is deeply involved in that paradox. Facing up to those contradictions and tensions in the process is, we believe, an important step in assessing the real value of incorporating the review process within a modern democratic state.

The review process

There are many different stories that could be told about the way in which our work was ‘political’. During the review, we became aware that we were a very small part in many larger political discourses resulting from many different sources: party politics, systems of governance, power differentials. These included discourses about the relationship between the Minister and the higher education sector in Wales; about the relationship between the Higher Education Funding Council and the National Assembly; about the relationship between Wales and key bodies in England such as the DfES and the TDA; about the development of Welsh-language policy. Of the many stories that could be told, we want to concentrate here on just three that illustrate different ‘moments’ in the review process. They are the setting up of the review; the way in which we attempted to engage the higher education sector in Wales in the review process; and finally our recommendations and how they were responded to.

Setting up the review

There are two key issues that we wish to highlight in the setting up of the review. The first concerns the Terms of Reference and the second concerns the membership of the Support Group. Both of these were highly significant in shaping the way we worked and perhaps in the final outcomes of our review.

The idea that there should be a review of initial teacher education had been discussed for a number of years amongst the teacher education community in Wales. Estyn, in successive reports, had expressed concerns about the quality and variability of provision (Estyn 2003, 2005). Some schools and LEAs were keen to use a review to advocate expanding the Graduate Teacher Programme. And the Welsh-language school system had for many years expressed concern about the numbers of teachers willing and able to teach through the medium of Welsh.

Perhaps the largest number of concerns, however, was expressed by those in higher education: concerns about funding of the system, about the difficulties of establishing effective school partnerships in some parts of Wales and, perhaps most fundamentally of all, about the continuing lack of recognition of a distinctive role for universities in teacher *education* rather than simply in teacher *training*.

However, in the end, it was none of these concerns that led to the establishment of the review; instead, it was the issue of the numbers of teachers being trained – a particular concern for the Welsh Assembly Government itself that, since devolution, was responsible for the funding of all higher education, including teacher training.

For several years prior to the establishment of the review, there had been growing worries about the apparent difficulty that some newly qualified teachers in Wales were having in finding a post. When combined with demographic forecasts for the future reduction in the school population, it was becoming apparent that, in the future, the position might get worse rather than better. From the point of view of the Welsh Assembly Government, this was a nettle that had to be grasped.

There were, therefore, many competing expectations and aspirations about what questions a review of Initial Teacher Training Provision in Wales might address. Initially, discussion with the Minister and her civil servants suggested that the review should confine itself entirely to the issue of numbers of teachers needed. Behind this question was the issue of whether or not it was technically possible, or indeed sensible, for Wales only to focus on producing its own teachers. Our response was that simple percentage cuts were unlikely

to be successful in that they could very easily destabilize the system; the complexities of staffing had to be taken into account as well as the implications for other forms of provision – continuing professional development (CPD), research. We were also keen to look in more detail at the substance of current provision and suggested that we address the issue of ‘quality’. This proposal was warmly accepted with two provisos, firstly, that we did not look at the issue of ‘partnerships’, and, secondly, that we did not address the issue of ‘content’. The opportunities for asking many of the more fundamental questions proposed by those in higher education were therefore effectively curtailed.

The second significant issue in the setting up of the review was the selection of the Support Group. Each of the independent reviews established in Wales in recent years has had such a group, drawn from a range of interest groups and communities from across Wales. Our experience of working with our Support Group was that they were indeed an invaluable resource; they functioned both as a source of expert advice and information and played a significant role in the shaping of our final recommendations. In the early stages of discussions about the review we were consulted on who should be a member of the Support Group; we made a number of suggestions, some of which were accepted. However, one key group that was considered inappropriate to include was representation from higher education itself. Our reasoning for their inclusion was that, given that our proposals for reform were likely to affect higher education more than any other group in Wales, it was vitally important to draw them into the review process as fully as possible. The Welsh Assembly Government took a different view, suggesting that, as higher education were the main providers, they should not be asked in effect ‘to review themselves’. In our initial proposals we also identified a number of individuals who were senior members of the Welsh-speaking community. Unfortunately, in the individuals finally selected by the Government for membership of the Support Group, there were no senior members of that community.

We would suggest that these two ‘exclusions’, from higher education and from the Welsh-language community, had a major impact on the way we had to work. It may also be that these exclusions had a significant impact on the way in which our review was responded to once it was published in that it had no insiders from these two key communities to act as ‘champions’ for it. These are issues that we discuss in more detail below.

Taking the evidence – listening to higher education

Our approach to collecting evidence for our Review was broadly based. Our aim was to achieve a report that was both technically authoritative and could be seen to have taken into account the views of as many individuals and organizations as possible. We therefore constructed a website encouraging anyone with an interest in initial teacher education to write to us. In addition, we contacted over 100 organizations, setting out our review questions and asking them to write to us. As a result of these requests we received 51 written responses from many different sorts of organizations and individuals.

We took evidence, in addition, for seven whole days in Cardiff; representatives from 24 different organizations gave oral and written evidence and engaged in discussion with panel members. The review team also conducted a number of individual meetings with representatives from leading bodies, such as DfES, HEFCW, TDA and GTCW, and consulted over 80 different relevant policy documents.

However, although we were keen to receive comments from as broad a range of interested parties as possible, we were not even-handed in our collection of evidence. From the earliest stages of our review we were keen to give particular attention to the seven higher education institutions (HEIs) that are the main providers of initial teacher education in Wales. During the course of the review, members of the team therefore paid a day's visit to each of the seven institutions. As a result, we had the opportunity to meet with over 60 colleagues including Vice Chancellors, headteachers, mentors, course leaders and lecturers. In addition, we convened two one-day seminars – one at the beginning of our review and one at the end – where we invited representatives from each HEI to contribute to a discussion of our Review questions, to examine our evidence, and to debate our emerging recommendations.

Why did we make so much effort to focus on the needs and interests of higher education? Our response is three-fold. First, we were acutely aware that, as outsiders to teacher education in Wales, we might not understand the many institutional, regional and linguistic complexities involved in the day-to-day running of teacher education in Wales. We also recognized that, if our recommendations were to gain support, we had to ensure that we were seen as basing our analysis on a thorough understanding of current provision in Wales. Finally, we must acknowledge that as a team we were far from neutral on the contribution of higher education to teacher education. Both Furlong and Hagger have written extensively on teacher education over the

last two decades (Furlong et al., 1988; Furlong and Maynard, 1995; Furlong et al., 2000; Hagger et al., 1993; Hagger, 1997; Hagger and McIntyre, 2006); each in their own right is well known for their commitment to the role of both schools and HEIs in the provision of high-quality professional education. We were also on record as having a commitment to the establishment of strong schools of education in Wales, capable of providing leadership in terms of CPD and research as well as initial teacher education (see, for example, Furlong and White, 2001). Given this background, our 'lack of neutrality' in relation to the contribution of HEIs was inevitable.

The recommendations and the response

In our final report (Furlong et al., 2006), we make 36 recommendations; here we focus on just three. In each case we want to explore the political dimension of our recommendations and the response to them.

The most controversial finding from our research was the current 'employment rate' amongst newly qualified teachers in Wales. Over the last four years, GTCW had, for the first time, been collecting and publishing robust evidence on the numbers of newly qualified teachers taking up permanent posts in Wales. With this statistical evidence it was straightforward to calculate the primary and secondary 'employment rates' for each of the last four years; that is, the numbers of posts available for newly qualified teachers as a proportion of the numbers of training places available in any one year. For newly qualified primary teachers, the employment rate over the previous four years had never been higher than 41 per cent and in 2003/4 it had dropped to 28 per cent. For newly qualified secondary teachers, the employment rate was on average 56 per cent over the previous four years. Our analysis also showed that the numbers of teachers trained in Wales seeking employment elsewhere in the UK was at the very most 20 per cent of those trained, a number that was easily matched by those training elsewhere and seeking to work in Wales. Moreover, cross-border flow was reducing over time, probably as a result of the introduction of higher education fees. Our evidence therefore showed, for the first time, the degree of overproduction of teachers in Wales. When, to these figures, we added the substantial downward projection in demand for teachers that is likely to arise because of demographic trends over the next five to ten years, the size of the challenge facing the sector became apparent.

With these challenging figures in mind we therefore made a number of interrelated proposals for the restructuring of teacher education in Wales.

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For primary training, we suggested that numbers be reduced by up to 50 per cent over the next five years. This, we argued, should be achieved by moving to entirely postgraduate provision. However, for that to happen, the capacity of HEIs to deliver these programmes would need to be protected. HEFCW therefore needed to ensure that the unit of resource going to each institution should remain largely the same. We also recognized that current undergraduate courses provided a vitally important access route into higher education for some disadvantaged groups and was a very important resource in terms of access to Welsh-language provision. We therefore recommended the development of a new form of undergraduate provision – a new degree to be offered by departments of education that would serve the needs of the same group of vocationally oriented young people who currently applied for the BA (Ed) degree. These ‘pre-professional degrees’ should lead to a range of different programmes of postgraduate professional training (including the PGCE) for careers working with young people. We also suggested that each school of education offering this new degree should offer some provision through the medium of Welsh.

For secondary provision, we recommended a reduction of 25 per cent over the next five years. However, here we suggested that adjusting provision was more complex; a more detailed analysis could not take place until the numbers of institutions offering teacher education in Wales was addressed.

Our evidence demonstrated that the current financial position of many of the seven main providers of teacher education in Wales was not strong. We therefore argued that Wales needed to develop three main schools of education – North and Central, South West, South East. Each school should in principle offer the full range of provision needed to meet the future needs of Wales. In addition, they should have a CPD portfolio and research capacity. Over the next five years, once numbers were brought more into line with actual demand for new teachers, we also recommended that the Welsh Assembly Government should seriously consider establishing a guaranteed induction placement for all newly qualified teachers.

These then were the most challenging of our recommendations, designed to respond to the significant downturn in demand for teachers needed over the next 5–10 years in Wales, but also designed to protect and indeed strengthen provision in the longer term. How were they responded to by different communities in Wales and most particularly by the Welsh Assembly Government?

Our final report was formally discussed by the Assembly’s Education and Lifelong Learning (ELL) Committee in January 2006. Other bodies were

also asked to give evidence to the Committee on their response to the report. Many – GTC Wales, Estyn, HEFCW, ADEW – were highly positive, warmly welcoming our proposals. Others, however, were more critical, particularly Higher Education Wales (the Vice Chancellors' organization). Their representative stated that they had 'consistently opposed one of the fundamental assumptions of this report, namely that the sole purpose of initial teacher training in Wales should be to meet the immediate needs of Welsh schools' (NAfW, 2006b: para. 201).

However, probably the most significant criticisms came in written evidence received from the Steering Group for Welsh Medium Provision in Higher Education. They were particularly concerned with the impact that ending the undergraduate BA Education degree would have on the supply of Welsh teachers. They also expressed concern that, as undergraduate ITT provision accounted for some 31 per cent of all Welsh-medium provision within higher education in all, abandoning the degree could have a major adverse impact on current targets for overall Welsh-medium undergraduate provision in Wales.

In March 2006, the Minister outlined her own response to the report to the ELL committee. She accepted, for the purposes of planning, the proposed reductions of ITT student places – to be achieved over the next five years, although she also announced a short-term exercise to be carried out by the Statistical Directorate 'in order to establish confidence in the data' (NAfW, 2006c, Annex A para 2).

Given the reduction in ITT numbers envisaged, the Minister also accepted the case for reconfiguring ITT provision based on fewer individual providers than at present. However, she stated that she was not wedded to one particular model for this; she therefore remitted HEFCW to produce a detailed plan for a reconfiguration of HEI ITT providers in Wales.

Finally, on the issue of undergraduate provision, the Minister concluded that a measure of undergraduate provision should be retained because of the impact that closing such courses might have on reducing the diversity of entry into the profession and the possible impact on Welsh-medium numbers – both for teaching and for higher education generally.

Discussion

What our description of these three 'moments' in the development of our review demonstrates is that, as a process, it was anything but 'neutrally'

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'scientific'; we were embedded in many competing political discourses. Politics was involved in the setting up of the review and the questions that we asked. It was involved in how we went about collecting evidence, it was involved in our interpretation of that evidence and it was involved in how the report was responded to afterwards. And, as we noted in the introduction, the review was embedded in many other different political discourses as well; these three have merely been illustrations.

But should we be surprised at such an observation? And, perhaps more importantly, does the fact that the review was indeed part of a political process in this way undermine its claims to neutrality and objectivity? Does it undermine its claim to contribute to the democratic process? If the aspiration of 'evidence-based policy-making' is to bring some critical distance to the advice that is offered to policy-makers, then does our analysis undermine that aspiration? Have we really moved beyond basing policy advice on ideology and sectional interest?

Our first response is that, 'no', we should not be surprised. Any careful reflection on how research is carried out will reveal that decisions have to be made at every turn: in deciding what questions to ask, what evidence to collect and how to interpret that evidence. Moreover, the growing body of literature on what makes effective policy research would highlight precisely the same range of political issues that we confronted in our review.

Buxton and Hanney (1994), for example, talk about the importance of 'policy maker involvement and brokerage, as key factors in enhancing utilisation', while Selby Smith (2000) talks about the importance of 'linkages', between researchers, practitioners and policy-makers if research is to have any impact. Our review would largely corroborate Selby Smith's comments when he suggests:

To stress the concept of linkages is to be concerned with facilitating the establishment of multiple areas of collaboration between researchers, policy makers and practitioners, given the multiple pathways through which research can influence policy and practice. (p. 33)

Our experience would suggest that it is the concept of 'linkages' that marks the key difference between a review and a more conventional academic research project. Throughout the review process we were in constant dialogue with policy-makers and practitioners within many different policy communities. But, significantly, during those contacts we frequently found ourselves not only listening to representatives for the 'evidence' they could give, but also trying to understand the political realities of their world and

'sounding out' possible policy recommendations. Unlike a conventional research project, the processes of gathering 'evidence' and policy formation were blurred. While such blurring may be considered by some as undermining the objectivity of our work, we would suggest that in reality it allowed us to develop more realistic and carefully grounded recommendations.

We would also agree with Selby Smith when he suggests that linkages are important in ensuring that researchers address the 'right' questions (Selby Smith 2000). As we have described, in deciding what questions to address we were able to engage in some debate and to a degree shape the agenda for the review. However, through that process, it also became clear that the Welsh Assembly Government was only ready to 'hear' particular issues. Whatever our personal interests, whatever the aspirations of others, the overriding issue for the policy-makers concerned the numbers of teachers being trained. If our review was to be taken seriously, it was essential that we too made this the central issue to be considered. Other questions, however important to us or to other interest groups, had to take second place. We would not apologize for 'shaping' our research questions in this way; doing so was part of the political reality that we faced.

Other studies, such as those of Jones and Trembath (see Selby Smith, 2000), have also noted the importance of 'champions' to support research, and to encourage its use and develop linkages within and outside the organization. Through our Support Group we were able to recruit a number of key 'champions' for our Review (senior representatives from the Inspectorate, the General Teaching Council, local education authorities and the Higher Education Funding Council) who were vitally important in brokering support within their own policy communities. During the process of collecting evidence, our work with Higher Education Institutions and with the Welsh-language community also gained us a number of key individual supporters. Where we were less successful was in gaining formal endorsement from these two key communities. As a result, there were only limited opportunities for us to engage with the leaders of the higher education and Welsh-language communities. Had this been possible, then it is our view that their opposition to some of our proposals might well have been allayed.

In understanding the Minister's response to our review, we might also draw on the work of Halpern of the No. 10 Policy Unit (Halpern, 2003) who argues that for evidence to be 'heard' it has to be within a policy-maker's 'Zone of Proximal Development'. It was clear that our evidence on

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the 'employment rate' amongst newly qualified teachers was a surprise to everyone; indeed, it was a surprise to us and we and the General Teaching Council carefully checked the figures again and again. The degree of over-capacity within the system was clearly outside the ZPD for policy-makers and practitioners at all levels of the system. It is therefore not surprising that the Minister's response was cautious – commissioning additional work in order to establish 'confidence in the data' while at the same time broadly accepting our arguments.

Finally, we might also take comfort from the fact that not all of our recommendations were taken up directly by the government from those who remind us that, in the policy field, single research studies seldom have a one-to-one impact. As Weiss' (1998) long-term analysis of the policy process has demonstrated, research studies are much more likely to contribute to a longer-term climate of opinion than to immediate change; what they can do is help to set out the terms of a debate. And it is clear that, in the field of teacher education in Wales, the debate is continuing.

Conclusion

In the opening section of this paper we referred to what Shulock (1999) called the 'paradox of policy analysis', which arises from 'a mismatch between notions of how the policy process should work and its actual messy, uncertain, unstable and essentially political realities' (p. 218). What we have tried to demonstrate is that our review was very much part of that messy, uncertain and essentially political world. Indeed, given its high profile, how could it have been otherwise? There was far too much at stake for all of the parties involved for it to be outside the political process. But does that mean that all we have is political reality? If it is naïve to understand evidence-based policy-making as a straightforward, technical rationalist process, is the alternative to agree with Ball (1990), who argues that policy-making is 'unscientific and irrational, whatever the claims of policy makers to the contrary' (p. 3)?

Our experience would suggest that neither of these two extremes is correct. Certainly the gathering of evidence was anything but a technical rationalist process, but we would also suggest that the gathering of evidence never is or can be. All research is partial and policy-based research is no different. Moreover, to recognize the partiality of the process does not mean that we did not do our best to bring together such evidence as was available

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on the questions we were asked to address. Much of the evidence we assembled, even when it was already in the public domain, had not been brought together in that form; it was therefore not available to policy-makers. Through the review process, we were able to broaden and deepen the range of information that was available to policy-makers in considering the future of teacher education in Wales.

Moreover, we would also suggest that the review process presented an opportunity to democratize policy-making – at least to a degree. It was an opportunity for a wider range of ‘voices’ to be heard in the policy debate than would otherwise have been the case. Indeed, given the very broad notion of what counted as ‘evidence’, we might argue that the review process was more ‘open’, more ‘democratic’ than many conventional research projects with their predetermined ‘scientific’ notions of what counts as evidence in the first place.

In his analysis of the first term of the Welsh Assembly Government, G. Rees (2004) argues that since democratic devolution, many established power groups have continued to exert influence on educational policy in Wales – civil servants (especially the Inspectorate), professional organizations and trade unions and local education authorities. These groups were also highly influential in our review. Nevertheless, in the way we went about our work and in what we counted as evidence, it was clear that our review, like the others that have been conducted in Wales, for all their political realities, did provide an opportunity for a broader range of voices to be heard in the political process. In the longer term, whether that opportunity for greater democracy is taken of course depends on how such reviews are responded to by the Welsh Assembly Government. In our case, the jury is still out.

E-mail: John.Furlong@edstud.ox.ac.uk
hazel.hagger@edstud.ox.ac.uk
cerys.furlong@niacedc.org.uk

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