

Devolved education policymaking in the UK: a four jurisdictions perspective

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ABSTRACT

This short paper addresses the pace, ebb and flow of policy moves in education in the context of the continuing process of political and administrative devolution in the UK. The concept of policy making is explicitly approached as a process. Given the potentially broad policy arena, the focus is necessarily selective and restricted to policy for schools. The paper identifies areas of policy mobility and immobility drawing on the concepts of ‘policy mortality’ ‘drift’, ‘paralysis’ and ‘reversal’ (Gunter and Courtney, 2023; Béland et al., 2016; Gallagher, 2021). This brief review aims to show how policy possibilities in the four closely-linked jurisdictions are influenced by varying degrees of coordinative capacity, ministerial influence, policy styles and advisory systems, and the power and influence of potential veto players. Critical attention is afforded to the enactment of the principle of subsidiarity in relation to education change. Rather than progressive linear advance, the paper notes three alternate moves: continuing tension between central control and local autonomy in education governance in Wales and Scotland, paralysing policy drift from political division in Northern Ireland, and rapid acceleration of market-oriented change in England.

Keywords: devolution, subsidiarity, policymaking

Introduction – devolution journeys

The four nations have different experiences of devolution. Popular support for devolution and the devolution settlements in each country varied. Support was far higher in the 1997 devolution referendum in Scotland (74%) than Wales (50.3%). The new legislative systems had varied levels of policy capacity influenced by their prior experience of policy development and the size of the devolved civil service. Scotland's distinctive education system and administrative devolution long predate political devolution. Devolution continues to evolve as greater powers are extended, more areas are devolved, and support grows among the populace (Scotland Act, 2012, 2016; Wales Act 2014, 2017). From 2007, the Scottish Executive was rebranded the Scottish Government, later formalised by the Scotland Act 2012. Similarly, the National Assembly for Wales/ Welsh Assembly Government was designated the Welsh Government (Llywodraeth Cymru) in 2011, subsequently formalised in the Wales Act 2014. In 2020, the National Assembly of Wales was renamed Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament) to reflect its extended powers. Although Wales remains the most limited devolved legislative system of the UK nations, its formal powers and responsibilities have developed rapidly. In contrast, any effort towards English devolution came much later and was limited to the creation of regional combined authorities from 2015. By which time, in contrast to the national school systems elsewhere in the UK, an increasingly fragmented school landscape offered little prospect for the development of locally led joint working with self-managing school Trusts (Greany, 2020; Woods et al., 2021).

Prior to UK general election of June 2024, the four administrations were led by five different political parties. Devolution as an 'event' took place during a period of single party dominance in Westminster, Edinburgh and Cardiff. Between 2010–23 no party was in power in more than one UK nation. The proportional electoral systems of the devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were intended to make cross-party co-operation, coalition and minority governments the norm. Indeed, consociationalism (power sharing) by design prevents majority rule in Northern Ireland. While Welsh Labour/Llafur Cymru provided political continuity (if not 'policy congruity') in Wales (Evans, 2022, p. 30), elsewhere the political landscape was transformed following the 2007 Scottish Parliament

election and the 2010 UK general election. Devolution was restored in Northern Ireland in February 2024 after a series of breakdowns of power sharing between unionist and nationalist parties from 2017. The third decade of devolution is one of political turbulence and cleavages within the UK with a growing schism between the two larger nations. Political polarisation intensified following the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014, the EU referendum of 2016 and the General Election of 2019. Territorial politics during the Covid pandemic and the emergence of ‘muscular’ or ‘hyper-unionism’ in England further exacerbated political tensions within UK governance (Kenny, 2022, p. 78). Rawlings (2022) notes that throughout the various phases of devolution, ‘Wales has had the only devolved administration fully committed to the UK’ (p. 714).

The political leadership, ministerial turnover and pace of change in the policy field of education has varied in each country. In the quasi-federal political system of the UK, policy for schools is a key ministerial portfolio. Education is the only Whitehall department with no programmes that apply to the devolved territories and no civil servants outside England (Paun and Munro, 2014). Whereas five Ministers in each country have held the Education portfolio in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland since 2010, in England there have been ten Secretaries of State for Education, including five since 2022. From 2010, England entered in a period of policy ‘hyperactivity’ (Braun et al., 2010, p. 548) with moves towards a Hirschian-influenced knowledge-rich curriculum, the rapid expansion of the academies programme, ‘hurried’ introduction of regional schools commissioners and a diminished role for local authorities (Freedman, 2022, p. 10). A sense of urgency underpinned reform shaped by ‘cultural conservatism’ and neoliberalism (Jones, 2013). Given ‘a legacy of asymmetry’ (Lesch and McCambridge, 2023), low initial policy capacity and lower levels of support for devolution, the rate of education policy innovation in Wales also increased, with system-level reform of the school curriculum and teacher education. However, where Gove (Education Secretary 2010–14) and Gibb (Minister of State for Schools, 2010–12, 2014–21, 2022–3) sought to ‘take back control’ from the education establishment (Craske, 2020, p. 286), in Wales collaboration was emphasised. Early policy initiatives included the Foundation Phase for children aged 3 to 7 which in contrast to the more formalised approach in England emphasised learning through play. Policy development in Scotland and Northern Ireland proceeded at a different

pace. Menter and Hulme (2008) describe processes of change in the first decade of devolution in Scotland as ‘less radical and at a slower pace than in England’ (p. 319). The second decade saw the consolidation of university-led teacher education (Donaldson, 2011) and the full implementation of the skills-based *Curriculum for Excellence*, revised in 2019 and reviewed in 2020 (OECD, 2021). Innovation in Northern Ireland continues to be adversely affected by the complexity, slow pace and conservative nature of education policy development in a historically divided society (Clarke and McFlynn, 2021). Overall, the ‘constrained divergence’ (Raffè and Byrne 2005, p. 1) of education policy making in the early post-devolution period has given way to an uneven ‘accelerated divergence’ (Hodgson and Spours, 2016, p. 516).

National distinction

Devolution gave policy impetus to efforts to assert national distinction in both the politics and processes of policy formation. Ostensibly national governments can design policy that is more responsive to local needs, preferences and values. Devolution increased the scope for policy experimentation and the potential for policy learning through comparison. As Paun et al. (2016) observe, the four nations provide a ‘living laboratory’ for cross-national comparison because ‘the four parts of the UK are much more similar to each other in terms of wider culture and institutional context than they are to any other country’ (p. 13). Policy innovation and divergence are enhanced by territorial competition and the opportunity to garner political capital by ‘othering’ one’s (larger) neighbour or identifying with the concerns of smaller nations previously subjected to ‘peripheralisation’ in policy debate in the UK (Lovering, 1991). Outside England, devolution has promoted the development of strong and progressive polities that signal ‘national’ values of egalitarianism and collectivism, social justice, and public provision over private wealth. Thus, for example, the former First Minister Rhodri Morgan (2002) made much of his intention to establish ‘clear red water’ between Welsh and Westminster Labour. In Wales, *The Learning Country* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2001) represented ‘the first fruits of policy development from the Assembly administration in the new era of devolution’ (Daugherty and Jones, 2002, p. 109). A sustained model of defensive distinction was pursued by an established policy community in Scotland accustomed to

resisting any change construed as an attempt to ‘Anglicise’ education policy (Menter and Hulme, 2008, p. 320). In 2013, former SNP leader Alex Salmond’s pledge that ‘the rocks will melt with the sun’ before tuition fees are reintroduced for Scotland’s undergraduates was literally carved in stone.

Policy styles and advisory systems

Each nation has drawn on independent commissions, panels, advisers and working groups to consider policy alternatives with varied levels of influence on outcomes. Government-appointed advisers are ‘conduits of policy mobility’ (Ball 2016, p. 557). Craft and Howlett (2013) define *externalisation* as ‘the extent to which actors outside government exercise influence’ by providing policy advice (p. 188). A wider range of non-government actors has entered the UK advice market in the context of a leaner civil service. However, there are differences in the extent to which the chosen advisers can be construed as representative of knowledge brokers within recognised ‘epistemic communities’ or are used to signify a participatory approach that serves to lend legitimacy to preferred recommendations. Haas (1992) defines epistemic communities as ‘a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area’ (p. 3). The relative influence of appointed advisers is contingent upon a range of contextual factors.

Contextual influences on national review processes ... include the timeliness of the review; the economic climate during the review; the knowledge, skills, commitment and aspirations (or policy activism) of appointed advisers; the receptiveness of stakeholders (e.g. ‘protective and defensive’ engagement) and the degree of cross-party support and continuity over time between government departments. (Hulme, Beauchamp and Clarke, 2015, p. 208)

The following section draws on emerging and established concepts from critical policy studies to illustrate policy processes within the new territorial politics of the union state. The first section uses the concept of ‘policy mortality’ (Gunter and Courtney, 2023) in accounting for radical change to school governance and the school curriculum in England. This is contrasted with the complex interplay of interests and knowledge flows within more collaborative policy environments. Selected examples are used to illustrate ‘policy drift’ (delay), ‘paralysis’ (inaction) and ‘reversal’

as possible outcomes of contestation. Examples include aborted moves to end school transfer tests and rationalise teacher education provision in Northern Ireland, and the abolition and subsequent re-introduction of national assessments in Wales and Scotland.

Policy mortality

The concept of policy mortality was introduced by Gunter and Courtney (2023) to describe the government ‘tactic’ of blaming and shaming in which the ‘failure’ of schools and educationists is ‘weaponised’ to accelerate ideological shifts in policy direction (p. 354). From this perspective, ‘failure is integral to change dynamics’ (p. 364). Reflecting on education policy in England, Gunter and Courtney (2023) argue that, ‘failure is a policy objective rather than a consequence of risky innovation and/or problematic implementation’ (p. 353). Trust in expertise in England has been challenged in pronounced discourses of derision that are intended to disarm and de-legitimise dissent (Craske, 2021). Craft and Halligan (2017) maintain that political influence over the policy process has increased through the use of political appointments that are often deemed to produce the outcomes Ministers want. In the wake of a contracting home civil service, Gunter et al. (2015) note the rise of a thriving ‘consultocracy’ in education policymaking in England. In this context, a process of de-institutionalisation through an increase in external policy advice may signal not a withdrawal but centralisation of executive power. The number of advisory groups multiplied over the last decade. Over the same period, academic expert advice has been marginalised in policy channels (Skerritt, 2023). Advisory groups have addressed initial teacher education (2015), school-based mentor standards (2016), behaviour in schools (2017), education staff wellbeing (2019), a ‘market review’ of initial teacher education (2021), multi-academy trust leadership development (2022), and cultural education (2023). Exley (2021) observes that advisory group membership is often drawn ‘from groups that were aligned with what the government was thinking anyway’ (p. 251). The de-politicisation of education policy in England has been associated with an erosion of democratic deliberation, reduced coordinative capacity (at the meso-level) and a reduction of political questions to questions of technical efficiency/ ‘what works’ (Gunter 2015).

Elsewhere in the UK, less adversarial approaches and a greater openness to knowledge exchange are evident. For example, Connell et al. (2023) maintain that in Wales external advice is generally perceived to ‘augment (rather than challenge)’ (p. 643).

Externalisation of policy advice in Wales has been driven by a subtly different dynamic from that which has commonly been identified at a UK level: the aim has been to augment the policymaking capacity of the civil service in a complementary and collaborative way, rather than in opposition to or competition with it (Connell et al., 2023, p. 633)

Distinctive policy development processes in Wales and Scotland emphasise stakeholder participation and consultation. The smaller size and connectedness of the devolved executives increases the prescience of external policy expertise and a consultative approach to policy design (Cairney et al., 2016). The ‘Welsh way’ of policy development is positioned as ‘more consensual’ than Westminster, stressing the ‘systematic inclusion of pressure participants’ in policy development (Cairney, 2009, p. 361). Similarly, policy making in Scotland has been characterised as consultative, joined-up, holistic and willing to devolve delivery to local public bodies through a collaborative infrastructure (Cairney et al., 2016). Policy discourse reflects a concern with asset-based approaches and co-production. Peter Housden (2014), then Permanent Secretary, Scottish Government, described the ‘Scottish approach’ as countering ‘professional sovereignty and organisational autonomy’ suggesting its small size gives an ‘immediacy to its key relationships’ (p. 74).

Following the OECD report, *Improving Schools in Scotland* (2015), new bodies were created to promote greater collaboration between researchers, policymakers and practitioners. An International Council of Education Advisers (ICEA) was established in 2016 to advise Ministers (Scottish Government, 2023).¹ In addition, in 2017 a National Advisory Group (NAG) and Academic Reference Group (ARG) were established to deepen cross-sector collaboration. External membership of the NAG includes senior colleagues with responsibility for educational research

1 <https://www.gov.scot/groups/international-council-of-education-advisers/>
The eleven members of the ICEA include three academics from Russell Group universities in Scotland, a Scottish Headteacher and seven academics and policy advisers from North America, Europe and Singapore

from a range of stakeholder organisations including the General Teaching Council (GTCS), Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE), and Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA). ARG membership is drawn from the Royal Society of Edinburgh's Education Committee and the Scottish Council of Deans of Education (SCDE), with one member representing Gaelic Medium Education.

An espoused commitment to consultation is evident in recent reviews commissioned by the Scottish Government that were led (or co-led) by respected figures from within Scotland's education community who possess academic expertise and acknowledged professional capacity. These include Muir (2022)² *Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education*; Hayward (2023)³ *It's Our Future – Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment: report*; and the report of the national discussion on education by Campell and Harris (2023)⁴ *All Learners in Scotland Matter*.

In addition, a small number of repeat players have acted as key consultants in the smaller nations at different times. Foremost of these are Graham Donaldson (*Teaching Scotland's Future* (2011) followed by the curriculum review *Successful Futures* (2015) and *A Learning Inspectorate* (2018) in Wales) and John Furlong (review of teacher education in Wales, *Teaching Tomorrow's Teachers*, 2015). Mark Priestley (collaborative curriculum enquiry), Louise Hayward (learning progression) and Keir Bloomer (*Investing in a Better Future, Independent Review of Education* (2023), Northern Ireland) have also all contributed to policy discussions across national boundaries within the UK. Thus, while diverse national-territorial imaginaries co-exist within the United Kingdom, it is possible to discern areas of policy 'hybridisation' (Evans, 2009) enabled by idea carriers/expert advisers working with local stakeholder groups, especially in regard to the school curriculum and teacher education. The politics of policy attraction discernible in the smaller countries contrasts with the condemnatory strategies of disruptive innovation in England.

2 Kenneth Muir is a former chief executive of The General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2014–21.

3 Louise Hayward is Professor Emerita University of Glasgow.

4 Carol Campbell was Professor of Education at the University of Glasgow and Head of Moray House Edinburgh University from September 2024; Alma Harris is Emeritus Professor Swansea University and Professor at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

Policy drift and paralysis

Much is made of the importance of public deliberation and consensus building within collaborative infrastructures of devolved governance. However, consultation is seldom aligned with agility in policy design. The following section considers the limitations of such an approach in the context of political division. The concept of drift is used here to bring a sense of agency to considerations of policy *immobility*, elsewhere described as ‘functional inertia’ (McFlynn et al., 2024, p. 1). Béland et al. (2016) maintain that ‘policy drift’ requires that potential reform solutions are available but are not adopted. From this perspective, ‘Drift ... is not simply a result of a dearth of policy ideas, but the consequence of a drive to maintain the legislative status quo’ (Béland et al., 2016, p. 204). Needham and Hall (2022) note that drift is more likely where there are more veto players and veto points, and conditions of party-political stalemate. Drift is used here to explain continuity in some aspects of education policy using the examples of school transfer tests and arrangements for teacher education in Northern Ireland (NI).

With the establishment of the NI Assembly in 1999 direct rule ceased, and devolution was restored. This gave the Education Minister (1999–2002), Martin McGuinness, legislative responsibility for education (McGuinness, 2012). His first move was to abolish the transfer test (known as the 11+), citing the work of Gallagher and Smith (2000) who reported that ‘no school system has emerged to solve the problem of low-achieving schools. However, a selective system produces a disproportionate number of schools which combine low ability and social disadvantage in their enrolments, thereby compounding the educational disadvantages of both factors’ (p. 45). It was the intention to have the last transfer test in 2008, but politicians leaned on the political compromise associated with the implementation of the St Andrews agreement (2006), which allowed Grammar schools to set their own tests if they wished. The result of this process was that pupils now had to sit more tests since the Catholic grammar schools and the state (mainly Protestant) schools could not agree on a common test (McGuinness, 2012). It is important to note that with this system, schools did not have to prepare pupils for the transfer test. However, in 2016 the new Education Minister, Peter Weir, from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) introduced a new policy that schools could now start preparing pupils for the transfer test. The narrative relating

to the transfer test demonstrates how political division between Sinn Féin and DUP education ministers influenced these key decisions and that even when Sinn Féin were strongly opposed to academic selection, the DUP had the power to overrule that decision.

Similarly, an evidence-based case to reconfigure teacher education provision failed in the face of fierce opposition from denominational colleges (Clarke and Magennis, 2015). St Mary's College and Stranmillis College in Belfast serve the Catholic/Nationalist population and the Protestant/Unionist population, respectively. Two reviews of provision – a financial review and a review conducted by an international advisory panel – recommended a rationalisation or reconfiguration of provision to address disparities in funding and student allocations (DfE, 2013, DfE 2014). However, as Clarke and McFlynn (2021) noted 'the DUP and Sinn Féin united (across the political divide) to dissent and to defend the continuance of the status quo, in particular, the sustained funding of St Mary's and Stranmillis Colleges' (p. 133). A tight knit advocacy coalition (college defenders) prevailed over alternative sources of (epistemic) authority. Entrenched positions impeded the adaption of policy to address changing needs. As Gallagher (2021) observes, by maintaining the 'institutionalisation of difference' it is likely that policy immobility will 'deepen divisions and encourage disputes over resource allocation, rather than a focus on the common good' (p. 146).

Policy reversals

The above examples show how values-driven (progressive) and efficiency-driven (economic) policy choices can be vetoed by powerful coalitions representing particular interests. While policy divergence is an attractive marker of national distinction it remains conditional on political support. Temporary policy settlements can be preserved, unsettled, subject to backsliding or policy reversal.⁵ Policy ideas may gain traction and lose momentum. The pendulum swing of education reform

5 The clear example is the U-turn around Covid-19 exam replacement policy in all four nations. See Kippin, S., Cairney, P. (2022) The Covid-19 exams fiasco across the UK: four nations and two windows of opportunity. *British Politics* 17, 1–23 <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-021-00162-y>

is an outcome of contestation. The following section brings to the fore the contingent nature of policy through consideration of the interplay between subsidiarity and accountability in moves towards decentralised governance.

Across the national school systems of the UK there has been a putative devolution of higher levels of responsibility to schools and school professionals with an increase in accompanying ‘guidance’. Despite such espoused commitments to an ‘empowered school-led system’,⁶ evidence of a commitment to scaling back hierarchical and performance-based accountability systems has not been uniform or irreversible. The ending of school performance tables in Scotland and Wales was one of the most visible effects of devolution in the early 2000s. External tests at age 7, 11 and 14 were abolished in Scotland and Wales to avoid concerns about the effects of teaching to the tests. The scale of tests was also reduced in England, with only age 11 maths and English tests retained by 2010. There was then a reversal with Wales and Scotland both re-introducing external tests in some form to assess pupil progress, inform teacher judgements and assess national benchmarks. In Wales, Leighton Andrews (Minister for Education 2009–13) declared the PISA 2009 results published in 2010 to be ‘wake up call to a complacent system’ and ‘evidence of a systemic failure’ (Dauncey and Boshier, 2021, p. 1). Consequently, there was a policy shift towards greater accountability with the introduction of school banding and statutory testing in an effort to raise standards and reduce the attainment gap.

In Scotland, re-centralising tendencies were also evident during John Swinney’s tenure as Cabinet Secretary between 2016 and 2021 when the Minister positioned himself as responsible for both policy formation and the management of implementation processes. A discernible shift towards a more directive style of management followed the introduction of an outcomes-based National Improvement Framework (NIF) for Scottish Education (Scottish Government, 2016). At this time critical scrutiny of public bodies delivering education policies was growing (Scottish Parliament, 2017). The priority attached to educational equity (closing a persistent attainment ‘gap’) stimulated renewed interest in teacher/teaching quality, a content review of literacy and numeracy provision in university teacher education programmes, and the reintroduction of National Standardised Assessments (NSA) in literacy and numeracy in

6 <https://education.gov.scot/resources/an-empowered-system/>.

P1, P4, P7 and S3 (Scottish Government, 2017). ‘Closing the gap’ re-introduced new public management (NPM) practices to measure outcomes and regulate the profession.

In Wales, the education policy pendulum swung again when Huw Lewis, Minister for Education and Skills (2013–16), engineered a policy move away from performativity in the wake of the 2010 ‘PISA shock’, to re-focus reform efforts on the learner and developing teacher autonomy. *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015) and the subsequent *Curriculum for Wales* (WG, 2022) became the most ambitious reforms undertaken by the Welsh Government to date. The new curriculum was developed through the policy principle of subsidiarity with designated ‘Pioneer Schools’ (in receipt of additional funding) working with the middle tier to co-construct its design and development underpinned by the vision of a purposes-based curriculum. However, such new freedoms entered practice settings with a legacy of prescription and a degree of scepticism around appeals to professional empowerment vis-à-vis external intervention (Newton, 2020). Continued decline in the 2022 PISA outcomes and little progress in tackling a persistent poverty-related attainment gap may present renewed challenge and further adaptation of the Welsh model of soft governance (Sibieta, 2024).

Conclusion

This brief and selective review of devolved education policymaking in the UK has sought to bring agency to the foreground in consideration of policy manoeuvres, alternatives and outcomes. The concepts of ‘policy mortality’, ‘drift’, ‘paralysis’ and ‘reversal’ are used to draw attention to the motives and tactics at play within the policymaking process. Further empirical investigation of the connections between territorial politics and education governance would be instructive. An emerging body of work is beginning to engage with epistemic communities, multiple streams and advocacy coalition frameworks in accounts of how education policy is made and re-made (Gearin et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2022; Cummings et al., 2023; Santos and Pekkola, 2023). Theory-informed research in this area will help to generate new insights into the range of factors that promote the uptake or ‘extinction’ of policy ideas (Jones et al., 2016, p. 16) and the ratification or rejection of policy alternatives in comparable and closely linked systems.

This short review raised the significance of distinctive policy styles and advisory systems in the post-devolution context. In England, strategies to reduce ambiguity in the highly complex policy arena of education have proven effective. These include ‘shame/blame’ problem framing (Gunter and Courtney, 2023) and the creation of an echo chamber that restricts access to policy alternatives. Despite high turnover at the executive level (within the politics stream), policy continuity was enabled by previous structural changes, a reduction in the level of influence (and number) of potential veto players, and a reconstitution of ‘expertise’ that valorises practice knowledge.

Consultation and interest mediation remain more evident in education policymaking processes in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. More inclusive and participatory processes are aligned with wider discourses of practitioner and community empowerment, and espoused moves towards Public Value Management (PVM). As Brown (2021) explains, where New Public Management (NPM) is directed at ‘achieving public goals set by politicians; in PVM it is more complex, seen as achieving *negotiated* goals which can be shaped by stakeholder priorities through a participatory process’ (p. 808). However, participation in invited spaces is not the same as influence. Some groups clearly command significantly more influence than others (Rozbicka and Spohr, 2016). Centrally orchestrated collaboration across a dense network of public bodies is not without challenge. An espoused consultative policy style entails protracted deliberation that traverses vertical and horizontal lines of accountability. Aspirations towards collaborative networked governance are played out in a congested meso-tier. Collaborative working can be adversely affected by institutional self-interest and protectionism, leading to duplication of effort and less efficient use of diminishing public resource. Collaboration and consultation are intended to promote a stronger sense of policy ownership, binding policy design with actors charged with implementation. Critical commentators have questioned whether such invited participation is more democratic, indicating higher levels of local self-control and professional self-governance (Kirsten, 2020), or whether such activity is a form of ‘soft governance’ (Moos, 2009) that performs the work of ‘governing at a distance’ (Clarke, 2012).

The higher profile afforded to collaboration and the principle of subsidiarity can pose challenges for coherence in policy making and may test national policy actors’ confidence in local decision making. A

series of OECD Education policy reviews have pointed to the importance of coordination and the risks of over-activity. In Scotland, the OECD (2015) called for a ‘strengthened middle’ after identifying meso-tier organisations with ‘widely varying capacity’ (p. 98). Successive waves of education initiatives give the impression of ‘a busy policy landscape’ and ‘a system in constant reactive mode’ (OECD, 2021, p. 105). In Wales, the OECD (2014) warned that too many reforms could result in ‘reform fatigue’ (p. 34). The decentralised nature of education delivery meant that schools often interpret and implement policies differently, leading to disparities in educational quality and outcomes (OECD, 2020). There is some evidence of policy learning. In his Ministerial foreword to the revised *Our National Mission* (2023) Jeremy Miles wrote: ‘This roadmap sets out how our existing policies and commitments relate to one another, rather than listing new commitments and aspirations.’

In summary, devolved education policymaking involves the construction of a progressive vision for national education through consultation processes that maintain a symbolic distance from the UK Government approach to policymaking (Cairney, 2020). A range of factors influences the pace of change, and the stability or precarity of provisional policy settlements. Advance, drift or reversals at national level play out in the shadow of a transnational / global education reform movement (Sahlberg, 2012) and the pervasive influence of supranational organisations. Alternative approaches to the governance of public education require a counter-movement towards trust-based accountability. Policy divergence in regard to performance metrics is yet to emerge.

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