

1 Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the Welsh education system and introduces the background to the development of the new curriculum to be implemented in schools across Wales. It then describes the purpose of this report, which follows an invitation by the Welsh Government to the OECD to assess the progress made in advancing the curriculum reform and to suggest ways to move forward with its implementation. It concludes with a description of the methodology of the OECD assessment.

The education system in Wales

Wales is a country of the United Kingdom with a population of 3.1 million in 2016, or about 5% of the United Kingdom population (Office for National Statistics, 2019^[1]). As in the United Kingdom overall, the population is ageing, and Wales is the only nation in the United Kingdom where child poverty was on the rise from previous years, reaching 29% in 2019 and resulting in an increase in the percentage of students eligible for free school meals (18.3%) (Welsh Government, 2019^[2]; Welsh Government, 2019^[3]). The country is officially bilingual in English and Welsh. In 2019, almost 30% of the population spoke Welsh and 16.5% reported using Welsh every day (Welsh Government, 2019^[4]). Wales has a challenging geography, and most urban areas are located in the southern local authorities of Cardiff, Swansea and Newport. Although the United Kingdom is a unitary entity and a sovereign state, Wales has a form of autonomous government similar to Scotland and Northern Ireland, with a legislative body (the Welsh National Assembly) and a Welsh Government who operate in over 20 policy areas including economic development, health, social welfare, and education and training.

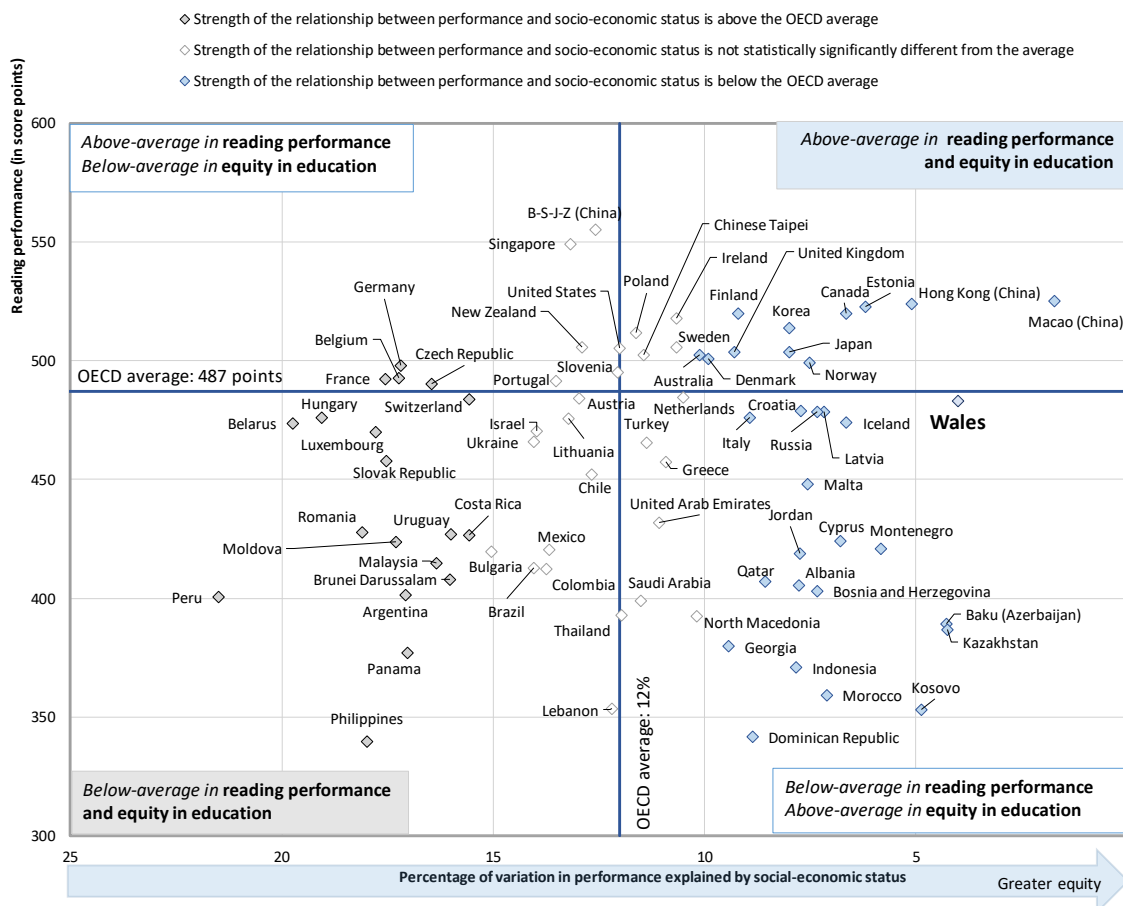
The Welsh Government leads the public education system through its Education Directorate. Across Wales, the 22 local authorities have significant responsibilities in the operation of education, including for funding allocation decisions. Education in Wales implies numerous other actors including four regional consortia for school improvement, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales (Estyn), arms-length agencies such as the National Academy for Educational Leadership, regulatory bodies such as the Education Workforce Council and Qualifications Wales, and social partners among trade and business unions. The committed education workforce counts 25 802 qualified teachers in service (23 593 full time equivalent) – of which 3 656 also held a school leadership position – and 27 101 support staff (23 251 full-time equivalent), of which half are teacher assistants (Welsh Government, 2019^[3]).

Education is compulsory in Wales from the age of 5 to 16 and aims to respond to the need of a diverse student population. Around 98% of children begin their education at 4 and 80% continue beyond 16 (OECD, 2018^[5]). Wales' public education system caters to approximately 468 000 students in 1 494 public schools and educational settings in nursery (age five), primary, secondary and special education, and to an additional 10 000 students in 75 independent schools. All schools teach both English and Welsh, but around 30% teach primarily in the Welsh medium, corresponding to 23% of the student body (Welsh Government, 2019^[3]). In Wales, some learners are educated in learning environments such as publicly funded non-maintained nursery settings, "Pupil Referral Units" and "Education Other Than School" provision modes, which is why Wales' stakeholders refer to them as "schools and educational settings". In this report, for the purpose of clarity and to facilitate comparison with other education systems, all these settings will be referred as "schools".

Although Wales scored below OECD averages in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results since 2006, the 2018 results showed an improvement in the literacy, numeracy and science levels of its 15 year old students (OECD, 2019^[6]; OECD, 2016^[7]; OECD, 2014^[8]; OECD, 2010^[9]; OECD, 2007^[10]). National tests also showed slight student progress since 2014, even if recent changes in the way student performance is measured do not allow for comparison from 2017 onwards. In 2016/17, close to 55% of students in Year 11 achieved the Level 2 threshold in each of the core subjects meaning that these students achieved GCSE at grades A*-C in English or Welsh language and mathematics. This translated to roughly 1.8 percentage points higher than the previous year under the former system (Welsh Government, 2016^[11]). PISA and national standardised test results are conventionally used in many OECD countries, although it must be noted they only measure certain aspects of an education system's performance.

Inequity in the Welsh system is around the average according to PISA data (OECD, 2016^[7]). In 2018, less disadvantaged students scored on average 49 points higher in reading than more disadvantaged students, a significantly smaller gap than the OECD average (89 points) (Sizmur et al., 2019^[12]). Figure 1.1 compares jurisdictions who participated in PISA 2018 in terms of reading performance and equity in education: Wales is slightly below average in reading, but significantly above average in equity. Equity remains a concern, however, in Welsh education policy (Welsh Government, 2017^[13]).

Figure 1.1. Student reading performance and equity in education in Wales, PISA 2018



Note: Equity is measured by the strength of the relationship between performance and socio-economic status. Socio-economic status is measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status. Information on statistical data for Israel: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>
 Source: OECD (2019^[14]) PISA 2018 Results (Volume II), Table II.B1.2.3 and Table II.B2.26

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The Welsh education system has been on a reform journey towards school improvement, following PISA and other international and national data on school performance, and selected OECD reviews. The Welsh Government consistently acknowledged OECD analysis and followed the subsequent suggestions made by the Organisation. Since 2014, the Welsh Government has been investing in developing and refining its education improvement strategies.

This report aims to contribute to the Welsh reform journey. It is focused on the new Curriculum for Wales and its implementation and aims to provide an assessment of progress made and next steps towards its successful implementation. As most of the data collection and analysis was conducted before the final version of the curriculum guidance documents was published, some of the considerations and issues raised in this report were, therefore, in the process of being addressed at the time it went to press.

A new curriculum to transform education in Wales

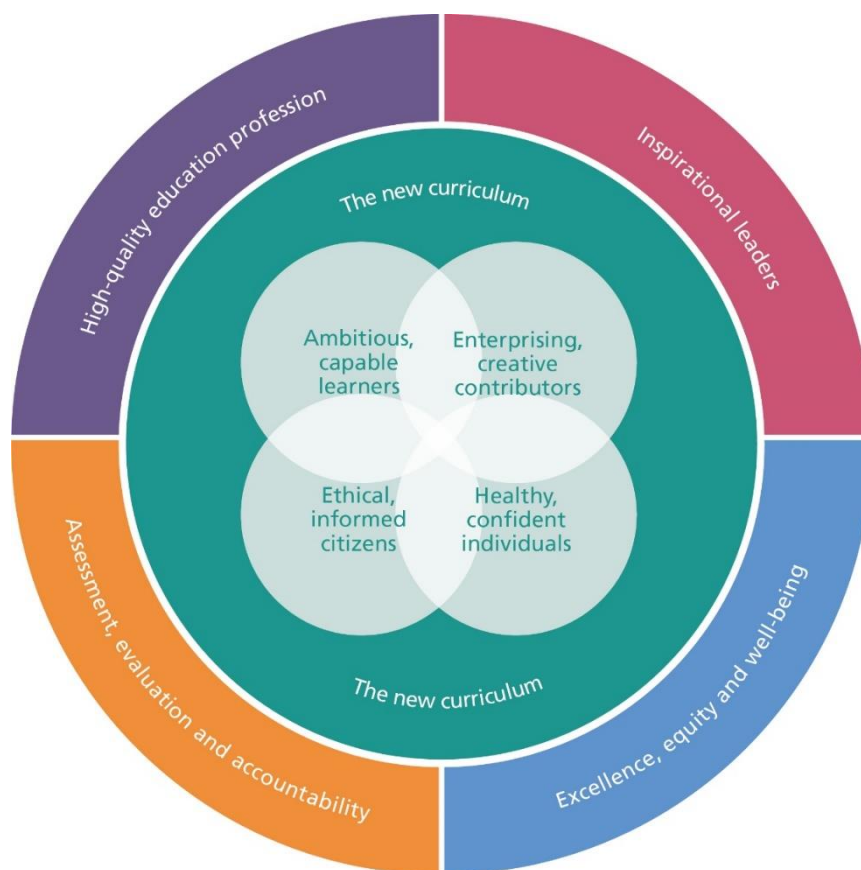
The new curriculum for Wales is the cornerstone of the country's efforts to turn its education system from a performance-driven education with a narrow focus, to an education led by commonly defined, learner-centred purposes. Since 2014, the Welsh Government has been investing in developing and refining its education improvement strategies. Building on the OECD review and other research reports (Hill, 2013^[15]; Estyn, 2014^[16]; OECD, 2014^[17]), the Welsh Government introduced their *Qualified for Life: An Education Improvement Plan for 3 to 19 Year Olds in Wales* (Welsh Government, 2014^[18]). The plan outlined the actions it would take for the next five years to improve educational attainment for all learners in Wales. It then initiated an independent review of its national curriculum and assessment to define the principles for a new curriculum, which resulted in the definition of the four purposes for the education system (Donaldson, 2015^[19]). In 2015, it published a new action plan: *Qualified for Life - A curriculum for Wales-a curriculum for life* (Welsh Government, 2015^[20]). In 2016, following a change in government, the OECD was invited to undertake an assessment of Wales' education reforms, and provided feedback on progress made since 2014. The report, *The Welsh Education Reform Journey*, offered recommendations to inform the next steps of the reform process (OECD, 2017^[21]).

Against this backdrop, Wales renewed its action plan in 2017 and turned the transformation of the education system into what it termed its “national mission”, in which all Welsh stakeholders were responsible for co-constructing educational improvement. The “national mission” intends to raise school standards, reduce the attainment gap between different groups of learners and ensure an education that is a source of national pride and public confidence (Welsh Government, 2017^[13]). The action plan for 2017-21 (*Education in Wales: Our national mission*) presented the Welsh vision for education and called for all children and young people to achieve the four purposes of becoming:

- ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

Wales' complete reform agenda encompasses five policy areas: curriculum; assessment and evaluation; equity, excellence and well-being; teaching; and leadership. Following expert assessments, consultations with the educational profession, and national discussions about education, curriculum reform became the spearhead of this reform journey, bringing coherence to the reform agenda. Each of the other policy areas – “enabling objectives”, as referred to in Wales – includes key policy tools to help turn the new curriculum framework into reality. Figure 1.2 displays a visual used by the Welsh Government to communicate the logic of the reform agenda. The action plan also calls for all schools to develop into learning organisations, which can more easily adapt to change.

Figure 1.2. The Welsh education reform: new curriculum and “enabling objectives”



Source: Welsh Government (2017^[13]), *Our National Mission – Action plan 2017-21*, <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/education-in-wales-our-national-mission.pdf>.

The Curriculum for Wales aims to cater better to the needs of Welsh learners in the 21st century, which implies significant changes from the curriculum currently used in schools. It covers all levels of education for children aged 3 to 16 in maintained (public) school settings. The new curriculum consists of a framework established at the national level for the curriculum and student assessment arrangements, but the enacted curriculum will depend on specific design and planning at school level. For this report’s purposes, “curriculum framework” and “assessment arrangements” refer to the sets of guidelines and documentation offered for public feedback in April 2019 and published in their final version in January 2020, which provide the overarching framework within which schools will develop their own local curricula.

Giving some autonomy for schools to adapt their curriculum within a clear national framework is one of the key principles of the proposed curriculum. The curriculum framework therefore sets the national requirements and principles of high-quality learning for all schools to respect, and provides some supporting guidance. It leaves, however, some considerable margins for schools to decide many aspects of their learners’ experience with respect for these principles, including selection of content, structure of subjects and areas of learning, timetables, and time for professional collaboration. This autonomy is to be understood as the recognition that school leaders, practitioners and schools’ governing bodies are the most relevant actors to assess their students’ needs and choose topics and activities of learning and assessment

that best support their learning (Welsh Government, 2020^[22]). Another key principle is that the curriculum is built around the “four purposes” of education and around the “statements of what matters” which describe what is essential for students to learn. Learning is structured to promote holistic learning, with six Areas of Learning and Experience (Areas) integrating several topic subjects, and three key competencies of literacy, numeracy and digital competency cutting across the six Areas. Progression of learning is acknowledged as a continuum rather than a succession of key standard stages.

In 2018, the Welsh Government invited the OECD to assess the progress made in advancing the curriculum reform since its previous report (2017^[21]), and suggest ways to move forward with its implementation. The Welsh Government has been developing the new national curriculum framework and assessment arrangements in collaboration with the education community. The draft Curriculum for Wales guidance was offered for public consultation between April and July 2019, to then be refined and tested by schools. Finalised versions of the curriculum guidance and assessment arrangements were published in January 2020. Subject to the successful passage of the Curriculum and Assessment Bill through the National Assembly for Wales, all schools are expected to plan their own curriculum based on the new framework and enact it by September 2022 for nursery levels to Year 7, then roll it out one Year at a time.

In order to turn this curriculum change into reality, the Welsh Government and all stakeholders involved must maintain a coherent strategy as they progressively implement the new curriculum. Implementation is more about building and fine-tuning a policy collaboratively rather than executing it. Consequently, it is of great importance to understand how the design of the curriculum, the engagement of stakeholders and the context interact, and what they imply for the implementation process. The OECD team’s analysis and suggestions aim to help Wales tackle the main issues linked to the new curriculum and plan the next steps of its implementation so schools and their students can reap the benefits from this ambitious change.

Methodology of the assessment

This report is part of the OECD’s Implementing Education Policies support programme with Wales (Box 1.1). It analyses Wales’ curriculum reform (2015-2019) in the wider context of the country’s education reform journey, and provides guidance on how the new Curriculum for Wales can be implemented effectively. An OECD team was created specifically for this project with Wales, bringing together analysts from the OECD’s Implementing Education Policies project and an external expert (Annex A). The project follows a concrete methodology to support implementation that combines research with field work, and engages with stakeholders in the country to ensure validity of the analysis and ownership of the recommendations. More concretely, the team: documented key aspects of education policy in Wales; drew on qualitative and quantitative comparative data from benchmarking education performers; undertook two assessment visits to Wales (Annex B); conducted additional phone interviews with stakeholders (Annex B); and maintained regular exchanges with the national co-ordination team with the Welsh Government. The OECD team also made extensive use of statistical information and policy documents provided by the Welsh Government and other institutions.

The present report has also benefitted from over six years of work between the OECD and Wales. This long-standing work included exchanges with different stakeholders, visits in numerous schools across the country, and discussions with many through workshops and advisory groups. The OECD team was thus able to build on previous knowledge and use reports from visits conducted between 2014 and 2019, as well as findings from previous OECD assessments for the analysis (OECD, 2018^[5]; OECD, 2017^[21]; OECD,

2014_[17]). The Welsh Government also took part in the OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 project, where countries and jurisdictions collectively reflect upon the types of competencies students need to thrive.

The report builds on the analytical framework developed by the OECD's Implementing Education Policies team (Viennet and Pont, 2017_[23]) to explore the elements that can contribute to the effective implementation of the Curriculum for Wales. The framework suggests that to have a coherent implementation strategy, policy makers need to engage with stakeholders early on in the process, and take into account the policy design and its context. The report provides an analytical lens to those involved with the curriculum policy, and suggests actions to take next to progress with its implementation throughout the system.

Box 1.1. Implementing policies: supporting change in education

The OECD programme *Implementing Policies: Supporting Effective Change in Education* offers peer learning and tailored support for countries and jurisdictions to help them achieve success in the implementation of their education policies and reforms. Tailored support is provided on topics the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills has comparative expertise in, including: introducing new curricula, developing schools as learning organisations, teacher policy, monitoring, evaluation, assessment and accountability systems and building educational leadership capacity, among others.

The tailored support consists of three complementary strands of work that aim to target countries' and jurisdictions' needs to introduce policy reforms and ensure impactful changes:

- **Policy assessments** take stock of reforms, policies and change strategies. The resulting report consists of an analysis of current strengths and challenges and provides concrete recommendations for enhancing and ensuring effective education implementation of the policy analysed. It follows a concrete methodology: a country questionnaire and desk study of policy documents, a three to five day assessment visit in which an OECD team of experts interviews a range of key stakeholders from various levels of the education system and additional exchanges with a project steering or reference group.
- **Strategic advice** is provided to education stakeholders and tailored to the needs of countries and jurisdictions. It can consist of reviewing policy documents (e.g. white papers or action plans), contributing to policy meetings, or facilitating the development of tools that support the implementation of specific policies.
- **Implementation seminars** can be organised to bring together education stakeholders involved in the reform or change process, for them to discuss, engage and shape the development of policies and implementation strategies.

For this project in Wales, two policy assessment visits were undertaken in September and October 2019, and additional interviews were conducted over the phone between August and October 2019. The assessment further built on nearly six years of information collected through the various OECD assessments conducted for Wales (OECD, 2018_[5]; 2017_[21]; 2014_[17]).

Website: <http://www.oecd.org/education/implementing-policies>.

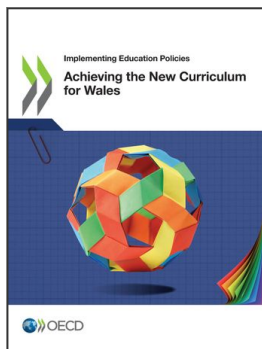
Brochure: <http://www.oecd.org/education/implementing-education-policies-flyer.pdf>.

Chapter 2 analyses the design of the new Curriculum for Wales, including its draft framework, student assessment arrangements, and its implications for Wales' teaching workforce. Chapter 3 discusses how stakeholders co-constructed the new curriculum and the importance of their engagement for the success of the policy. Chapter 4 reviews the main contextual elements that could facilitate or hinder curriculum implementation. Chapter 5 builds upon the analysis and conclusions developed in each of the previous chapters and offers an overview of the OECD team's recommendations to adjust Wales' implementation strategy in the short and medium term to ensure the new Curriculum is effectively implemented across Wales.

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