A comparison of school institutions and policies across the UK

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Since devolution in 1999, schools and education policy in the UK has become a devolved matter. This has been accompanied by a gradual divergence across all four nations of the UK on schools policy, partly reflecting different policy motivations and priorities. Some are well known, such as the abolition of league tables and SATs in Wales and Scotland. Some are less well known, such as differences in the curriculum, the differing roles of local authorities and the re-emergence of external testing in Scotland and Wales. Such divergences have been growing over time. In this report, we seek to provide an overview of how schools policy has changed since 1999 and how this has translated into school policies and perceptions.

Early Years

- All four nations provide a universal offer of publicly-funded early years education and childcare for three and four year olds. This is largest in Scotland (about 15-16 hours per week for 38 weeks) and slightly smaller in Wales (10-12.5 hours per week for 38 weeks).
- The offer in Northern Ireland can be full-time (22.5 hours per week) or part-time (12.5 hours) for 38 weeks of one school year, whilst schemes in the rest of the UK can amount to five terms.
- A larger share of this provision is delivered in the maintained or school sector in Wales (over 90 per cent), compared with 71 per cent in Scotland and 66 per cent in Northern Ireland. In England, only about 35 per cent of the universal offer is delivered in the maintained sector; a much larger share is delivered in private, voluntary and independent settings.
- England and Wales have both introduced extended entitlements of 30 hours per week for children of working parents, with this covering more weeks in Wales (48) than in England (38).
- Scotland plans to introduce an extended entitlement equivalent to 30 hours a week for all children, though this has been delayed to 2021.
- England and Scotland have introduced a similar offer of 15-16 hours per week of free early education and childcare for disadvantaged two-year olds. The offer in England covers the 40 per cent most disadvantaged two-year olds, whilst the equivalent offer in Scotland only covers approximately one quarter of children who would be eligible for free school meals.
- In Wales and Northern Ireland, pre-school provision for disadvantaged 2-3 year olds is provided as part of wider and more holistic services, 'Flying Start' in Wales and Sure Start in Northern Ireland.

School System

- In England and Wales, children are aged 4-5 when they start school. Children are slightly older when they start school in Northern Ireland (4 and 2 months to 5 and 2 months) and Scotland (4 ½ to 5 ½).
- Up until 2013, the school leaving age was around age 16 across the UK. However, from 2013 onwards the education leaving age was increased to 18 in England. This meant that young people in England had to continue in some of full-time or part-time education or training through to age 18. The school or education leaving age has not been changed elsewhere in the UK.

School Governance and Autonomy

- Schools in England have gained significant levels of autonomy over staffing and teacher pay, particularly as more and more schools have become Academies.

- In Wales, governance structures have not been significantly altered and local authorities retain more control than in England.
- In Scotland, local authorities and national government play a much more significant role in school decisions. The role of school governors has reduced over time, with school boards replaced by consultative parent councils.
- In Northern Ireland, there are a range of state-funded school types and governance structures, including controlled schools, catholic maintained schools, grant-maintained integrated, voluntary grammar schools and Irish-medium schools. All schools are managed by Boards of Governors.
- Northern Ireland stands out as the only nation of the UK to maintain a mostly selective secondary schooling system for state education, and a much larger share of pupils attend grammar schools (43 per cent) than in selective areas of England (about 25 per cent). There are no selective schools in Wales and Scotland.
- Reflecting their higher level of autonomy, headteachers in England feel they have more control over recruiting and retaining staff than their counterparts in the rest of the UK. Governing boards play a more prominent role in Wales and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, regional/local government has a greater role in staff recruitment and retention than the rest of the UK.

Funding

- Spending per pupil is highest in Scotland (£7,300), followed by England and Wales (£6,100) and lowest in Northern Ireland (£5,800).
- Cuts to spending per pupil over the last ten years have been largest in Northern Ireland (11 per cent), followed by England (9 per cent) and Wales (5 per cent). Cuts to spending per pupil in Scotland have been more than reversed with a net increase of 5 per cent since 2009-10, though most of this extra funding has been used to deliver higher levels of teacher pay in 2018 and 2019.
- The relatively low spending per pupil figures for Northern Ireland can partly be explained by delays in agreeing teacher pay awards. The teacher pay awards for 2017 and 2018 were not agreed and paid until the 2020-21 financial year.
- Pupil:teacher ratios are much lower in Scotland than in the other nations and have been falling over the last 25 years. For example, there are under 16 pupils for primary school teacher in Scotland, but more than 21 pupils for every primary school teacher elsewhere in the UK.
- Pupil:teacher ratios have been rising over time in both Northern Ireland and Wales, with pupil:teacher ratios now higher than in 2000 in both cases.
- In England, primary school pupil:teacher ratios have been more stable in recent years, though secondary school pupil:teacher ratios have risen.
- Schools are responsible for a larger share of funding in England (90 per cent) than in Wales (84 per cent) and a much larger share than in Scotland (66 per cent) and Northern Ireland (60 per cent), where local authorities and the Education Authority play a very large role.
- Headteachers in England and Wales have more control over formulating school budgets than in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Local government has more influence on formulating school budgets in Scotland, while national government has more influence in Northern Ireland.
- Explicit funding for disadvantaged pupils is greatest in England, for example, the Pupil Premium covers more pupils than equivalent schemes in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- Headteachers in Wales are most likely to perceive there to be problems with educational materials (such as books and IT), with headteachers in Scotland least likely to report problems that physical

infrastructure (such as the state of building and heating) impacts upon the quality of instruction provided by their school.

- Headteachers leading schools with highly disadvantaged intakes in Wales are the most likely to report problems with educational materials and physical infrastructure.
- Headteachers leading schools with disadvantaged intakes are more likely than other schools to report problems attracting teachers in all four nations, particularly in England and Scotland (where 44-45 per cent report problems).

Curriculum

- Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have each adopted a curriculum that emphasises cross-cutting areas of learning and significant autonomy to schools and teachers to shape the precise content.
- England has maintained traditional subjects and specific guidance on the minimum amount of material expected to be covered at each stage, though schools are clearly still free to go beyond this.
- Policy intentions about control over the curriculum do not always match with teacher perceptions, however. The perceived role of teachers in shaping course offerings and content is lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK, with a large perceived role for national and local government.
- Despite differences in appearances, it is England where the perceived role of national and local government is lowest. These perceived differences seem to coincide with the more general formal role of national and local government in shaping school decisions.

Exams and Assessments

- External tests at age 7, 11 and 14 were abolished in Scotland and Wales in the early 2000s to avoid concerns about teaching to the test. The scale of tests was also reduced in England, with only age 11 maths and English tests retained for all pupils by 2010.
- Wales and Scotland have since both re-introduced tests to assess pupil progress. England introduced a phonics check at age 6 and a baseline assessment for age 5 pupils is due to be introduced in 2021.
- There has been less change in Northern Ireland, with a sustained focus on teacher assessment. There is no longer an official transfer test to grammar schools, but two unofficial ones.
- Considering both internal and external tests, there are clear differences in how tests and assessments are set and used. Governing boards have a more important role in establishing assessment policies in England, Northern Ireland and Wales than in Scotland, where headteachers report local and national government to have greater influence.
- In England, schools are more likely to use test and assessment data to form judgements about teachers' effectiveness than in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Schools in England and Wales are also more likely to use tests to group students for instruction than in Northern Ireland. In Scotland, there has been a notable decline since 2009 in the use of assessment data by schools to draw comparisons to national or regional performance.
- England, Wales and Northern Ireland have increasingly diverged on GCSEs and A levels. England has changed the grading system for GCSEs to a new 9-1 system and focused GCSEs and A levels on linear end of course assessments. Wales and Northern Ireland have maintained the A*-G grading system for GCSEs, retained AS levels and a modular system of assessment for both GCSEs and A levels.
- As in the early 2000s, Scotland has continued to maintain a different set of academic qualifications. The main changes have been the creation of National 1-5 exams to replace Standard Grades in 2014, and the creation of Advanced Highers in 2000 to replace the Certificate of Sixth Year Studies.

School Accountability

- England has maintained a set of school performance tables and expanded them to cover more data to reduce perverse incentives for schools. All other nations abolished league tables in the early 2000s. Wales has since adopted a school categorisation system, which triggers different levels of external support.
- Poor inspection outcomes are more likely to trigger an immediate change in school governance in England than other countries, such as an Academy Order.
- Across all four nations, poor inspection outcomes are likely to result in formal notices, additional intervention and follow-up inspections.
- All four nations have made greater use over time of regional or national agencies as part of school improvement and accountability systems, such as Regional Schools Commissioners in England, the Regional Consortia in Wales, Education Scotland and the Education Authority of Northern Ireland.
- Quality assurance activities within schools are prominent throughout the UK. Schools in Northern Ireland and England are less likely to seek written feedback from pupils than schools in Scotland and Wales. Headteachers in England and Wales are, however, more likely to have extended consultations with external experts than those in Northern Ireland and Scotland.
- Headteachers in England and Northern Ireland are more likely to perceive there to be greater local competition for pupils than headteachers in Scotland and Wales. This will partly reflect geography and admissions arrangements, but also potentially reflect policymaker efforts to create a school system less built around competition and league tables in Wales and Scotland.

To conclude, even before devolution, there were longstanding differences in schools policies and institutions across the nations of the UK. Since devolution, there has been further divergence, particularly in the areas of governance, curriculum, assessments and accountability. To some extent, this reflects different overall approaches to education, and public services more generally, with a more market-orientated approach in England as compared with the other three nations. In this way, devolution has allowed policymakers in the devolved administrations to tailor policies and institutions more towards local political preferences.

There is naturally great interest in the effects of these different policies and institutions. Investigating such effects is a significant challenge and requires consistent data across the four nations on educational attainment and skills, which PISA is the only real source of at present. PISA has many benefits for drawing cross-country comparisons, but the fact that it only happens every 3 years and only relates to 15-year olds are obvious drawbacks. In a future report, we will examine how differences in skills evolve throughout childhood using the Millennium Cohort Study. We will also provide a detailed comparison in educational attainment across England and Wales using similar administrative data available across the two countries.

1. Introduction

Differences in school systems across the UK are longstanding through history. Scotland has long maintained a different set of school structures, examinations and assessments to other UK nations. The Northern Ireland school system has been mostly segregated across communities. Northern Ireland has also maintained a largely selective secondary school system, whilst the rest of the UK mostly abolished grammar schools. Historically, England and Wales have shared a common set of school structures and, until recently, were very similar in almost all aspects of school institutions and structures.

Since devolution in 1999, schools policy has become a devolved matter. This has been accompanied by a gradual divergence across all four nations on schools policy, partly reflecting different policy motivations and priorities. Some are well known, such as the abolition of league tables and SATs in Wales and Scotland. Some are less well known, such as differences in the curriculum, the role of local authorities and the re-emergence of external testing in Scotland and Wales. Such divergences have been growing over time.

There are already a number of previous articles charting the course of education policy within individual nations.[1] In this report, we seek to provide a comparison of how schools policy has changed since 1999 across the four nations and how this has translated into differences in school policies and perceptions. We divide policy into a number of key domains:

- **Early years**
- **School system**
- **School governance and autonomy**
- **Funding**
- **Curriculum**
- **Exams and assessments**
- **School accountability**

In each domain, we provide a comparative overview of the key institutional and policy differences over time. This shows how policymakers have used devolution to reflect national policy priorities.

Where possible, we then use the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey of head teachers to show how these institutional and policy differences are then reflected in actual school practices and perceptions on the ground. This PISA survey has been running since 2000 and allows us to show any significant changes / divergences across the UK over time. Around 600 schools from across the UK took part in PISA 2015 and the survey provides key information on the following issues:

- **School resources** - Pupil:teacher ratios, number of administrators and support staff.
- **Headteacher views of resource shortages** - e.g. lack of staff, lack of instructional material.
- **School management** - e.g. responsibility for hiring teachers, courses offered, course content.
- **Pupil assessments** - This includes frequency that children are tested, and how results from these tests are used (e.g. setting/streaming, guide student learning, monitor progress).
- **Quality assurance processes -** This includes how headteachers reacted to the last school inspection and how school policy changed as a result.

[1] Andrews, L. (2014). *Ministering to education: A reformer reports*. Parthian Books; Evans, G. (2021). *Back to the future? Reflections on three phases of education policy reform in Wales and their implications for teachers,* Journal of Educational Change; Bryce, T.G.K., Humes, W.M., Gillies, D. and Kennedy, A. (eds) (2018). *Scottish Education (fifth edition*), Edinburgh University Press.

The PISA data has a number of important advantages. It has been designed to be as comparable as possible across a large number of countries and represents one of the few sources of information that allows direct comparison of the different education systems across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The data are also collected regularly (every three years), facilitating analysis of change over time, with the survey design attempting to be nationally representative (although see [2]important caveats about potential bias in the PISA sample).

The PISA survey data do also have some limitations. Most important for our analysis is that the information about schools and school-systems are based upon information reported by headteachers. It is therefore subject to a degree of measurement/recall error and – for some questions – reflect headteachers opinions/views, rather than firmly established facts. Relatedly, even when the same survey instruments and questions are used in different countries there remains issues with cross-national comparability due to differences in culture and interpretation of questions. Although this may be less of a concern for cross-UK comparisons, where English is the predominant language, differences across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales for certain questions cannot be ruled out. Finally, as sample survey data, the sample size is limited – particularly at the school/headteacher level that we focus upon in this report.

Throughout, our goal is to provide an overview of the key differences in school systems across the UK, how these have grown up since devolution and what the results in terms of school policies and perceptions of headteachers have been.

Such differences in school systems are key in order to have a complete understanding of what might be driving differences in measures of skills and educational attainment across countries. For instance, comparisons using PISA tests for 15-year olds show that England performs close to the OECD average over time while scores in Northern Ireland and Scotland have fallen back. This also shows that scores in Wales have fallen well below the OECD average, with some slight recovery in more recent years. A detailed understanding of institutional and schools policy changes are key to interpreting the implications of such trends.

In future reports, we will examine how differences in skills evolve throughout childhood using the Millennium Cohort Study. We will also provide a detailed comparison in educational attainment across England and Wales using similar administrative data available across the two countries. An in-depth understanding of institutional and policy changes will be key to interpreting these differences.

2. Early Years

In this section, we describe the overall structure and scope of early years education systems across the UK, which is summarised in Figure 2.1 below.

All four nations provide a universal offer of early years education and childcare of about 10-15 hours a week, though this differs slightly in structure in each case. In general, the universal offer covers more hours and children in Scotland and England.

[2] Anders, J.; Has, S.; Jerrim, J.; Shure, N. and Zieger, L. (2020). *Is Canada really an education superpower? The impact of non-participation on results from PISA 2015*. Educational Assessment Evaluation and Accountability. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-020-09329-5; Jerrim, J. (2021). *PISA 2018 in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales*. Is the data really representative of all four corners of the UK? *Review of Education* (forthcoming)

Figure 2.1: Overview of early education systems across UK

	Universal Entitlement	Extended Entitlement	Offer for younger children
England	All 3 & 4 yr olds: 15 hrs for 38 weeks Eligible term after turning 3	3 & 4 yr olds with working parents: 30 hrs for 38 weeks	Most deprived 2 yr olds entitled to 15 hrs for 38 weeks
Wales	All 3 & 4 yr olds: 10-12.5 per week for 38 weeks Eligible term after turning 3	3 & 4 yr olds with working parents: 30 hrs for 48 weeks	Flying Start targeted at deprived 2 yr olds: 12.5 hrs childcare per week for 38 weeks & additional support
Scotland	3-5 yr olds: equiv. 16 hrs for 38 weeks Eligible term after turning 3	Plan to increase to 30 hours for 38 weeks	2 yr olds eligible for FSM: equiv. 16 hrs for 38 weeks
Northern Ireland	12.5hr or 22.5 hr places for 38 weeks for 3 yr olds Eligible school year after turning 3	No plans announced yet	Pre-school progamme for 2 yr olds as part of Sure Start

In England, all three- and four-year olds are eligible for the universal offer of 15 hours of free early education and childcare for 38 weeks (or 570 hours over a year).[3] This was expanded in gradual steps over time, e.g. to three-year olds by 2004, from 33 to 38 weeks in 2006 and from 12.5 to 15 hours in 2010.[4] In Wales, there is a similar universal offer of 10-12.5 hours foundation phase nursery to all three- and four-year olds.[5] In Scotland, all three to five-year olds are entitled to 600 hours of early learning and childcare, which is slightly above the 570 hours available in England.[6] It was increased to 600 hours from 475 hours in 2014. In Northern Ireland, three-year olds are entitled for a pre-school place over one school year (if they turned three before July each year).[7] About 60 per cent of places are part-time, 2.5 hours a day or 12.5 hours for 38 weeks, whilst 40 per cent of places are full-time, or 4.5 hours per week. Two-year olds are also eligible to access a pre-school place if places are not filled by three-year olds.

As illustrated in Figure 2.2, one key difference across the UK is the relative role of the maintained and private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sectors in delivering funded early education and childcare. In England, an expansion of the PVI sector has played a big role in delivering increases in the universal funded entitlement over time. The PVI sector now accounts for about two thirds of three- and four-year olds in funded early

[3] https://www.gov.uk/help-with-childcare-costs/free-childcare-and-education-for-2-to-4-year-olds?step-by-step-nav=f237ec8e-e82c-4ffa-8fba-2a88a739783b

[4] Belfield, C., Farquharson, C. and Sibieta L. (2018), *2018 Annual Report on Education Spending,* Institute for Fiscal Studies (https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/13306)

[5] https://www.earlyyears.wales/en/foundation-phase

[6] https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/scottish-education-system/early-learning-and-childcare-elc/

[7] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/applying-funded-pre-school-place-202021

education and childcare, with about one third of pupils in maintained nurseries or schools. In Northern Ireland, voluntary and private providers account for about one third of pupils in funded pre-school, with about two thirds in nursery classes or schools. In Scotland, private and voluntary providers delivering the early learning and childcare offer account for about 30 per cent of pre-school children, with about 70 per cent in local authority settings. In Wales, most of the foundation phase early years entitlement is delivered in the maintained sector, with pupils in local authority-maintained nursery schools and classes accounting for about 93 per cent of three- and four-year olds in Wales.

These differences in delivery are likely to be partly motivated by differences in the goals for early education and childcare across the four nations. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the quality of provision tends to be higher in the maintained sector, particularly in terms of inspection ratings and the qualifications of staff, though there is less difference in the quality of processes.[8] However, maintained settings tend to offer fewer hours per week of childcare than PVI settings; part-time provision can be less effective in increasing parental employment as it harder to find work to fit around part-time nursery places.[9]

Over the last few years, these early education and childcare offers have been expanded for three and four-year olds. Since 2017, working parents[10] in England are eligible for the extended entitlement of 30 hours per week for 38 weeks.[11] In Wales, the 'Childcare Offer' provides 30 hours of free early education and childcare for 48 weeks of the year.[12] Part of this consists of foundation phase nursery (10-12.5 hours a week), but the remainder can be used flexibly with registered providers outside the maintained sector. The Scottish Government plans to expand the early learning and childcare offer from 600 to 1,140 hours a year (the equivalent of 30 hour per week during term time) for all three- and four-year olds, not just children with working parents. This was originally intended to come into effect in 2020, but has been delayed to 2021 due to the ongoing pandemic.[13]

There have been calls for a similar expansion of the pre-school education programme in Northern Ireland, but no concrete proposals have been made yet.[14] The recent agreement for restoring the Northern Ireland Executive in 2020 commits to publishing a new childcare strategy, potentially including an extended entitlement.[15] Work on this strategy has been paused during the pandemic.

[8] Paull, G. and Popov, D. (2019) *The role and contribution of maintained nursery schools in the early years sector in England*, Department for Education Research Report (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/912995/Frontier_Economics_MNS_report_REVISED_v2.pdf)

[9] Brewer, M, Cattan, S., Crawford, C. and Rabe, B. (2020), *Does more free childcare help parents work more?,* IFS Working Paper 20/09 (https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14781)

[10] All parents earning the equivalent of 16 hours per week or more at the national living wage, and under £100,000 per year

[11] https://www.gov.uk/30-hours-free-childcare

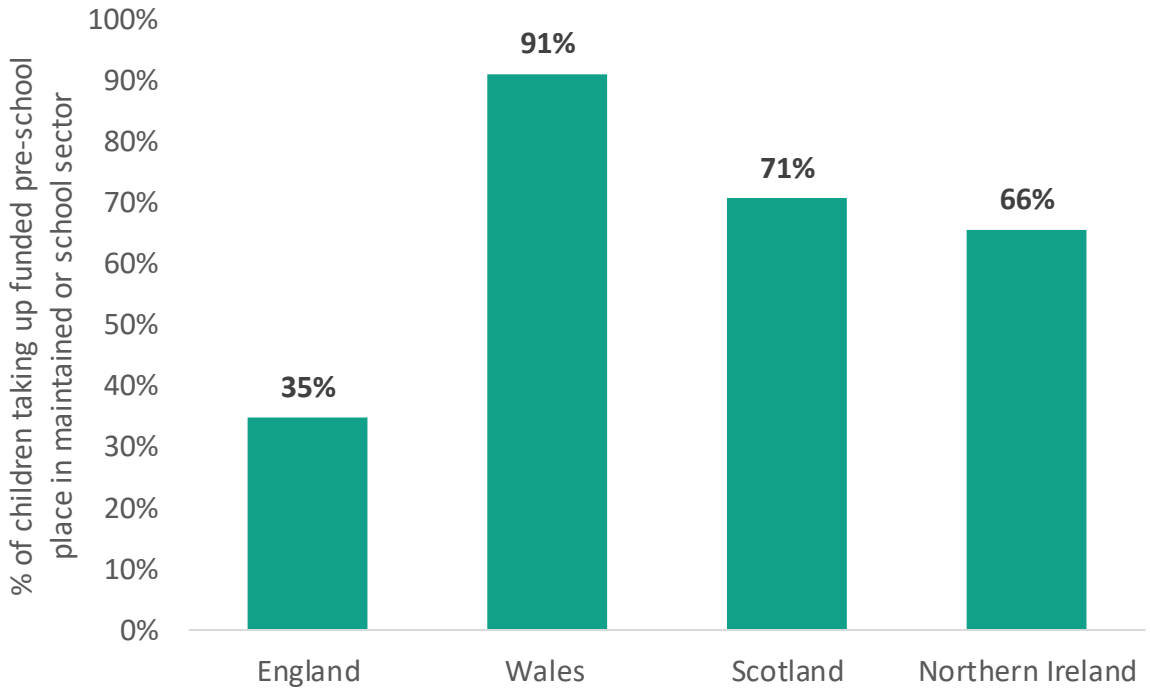
[12] https://gov.wales/childcare-offer-for-wales-campaign

[13] https://www.gov.scot/policies/early-education-and-care/early-learning-and-childcare/

[14] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-46903338

[15] 2020-01-08_a_new_decade__a_new_approach.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)

Figure 2.2: Share of children taking funded pre-school places in maintained or state school settings



Notes and sources for England: Share of 3- and 4-year olds taking up the universal entitlement in maintained settings (nursery classes, nursery schools) as a share of all 3- and 4-year olds taking up places (excluding infant classes) in January 2020 (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/education-provision-children-under-5-years-of-age-january-2020); **Notes and sources for Wales**: 3- and 4-year olds (as of 31st August 2019) in maintained schools in January 2020 (https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Pupils) as a share of the total population of 3- and 4-year olds in mid-2019 (https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Population-and-Migration/Population/Projections/National/2018-based/populationprojections-by-year-age); **Notes and sources for Scotland**: 3-5 year olds taking up funded early learning and childcare in local authority settings in September 2020 as a share of all registrations (https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland-2020/). **Notes and sources for Northern Ireland:** Share of 3-year olds taking up funded pre-school places in nursery schools and classes in 2019-20 (https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data).

Early years entitlements have also been expanded to cover younger pupils (aged 2-3) across many parts of the UK. In England, two-year olds in the most deprived areas became eligible for the 15 hours free entitlement from 2009 and this now covers approximately 40 per cent of the most deprived two-year olds, defined by their parents' receipt of benefits or their being disabled or looked after. In Wales, the 'Flying Start' programme was introduced in 2006, which provides free part-time childcare of 2.5 hours a day to 2-3 year olds in deprived areas as well as additional access to parenting support, health visitors and speech, language and communication support. The programme was expanded in 2016, with the number of children under age four eligible for services increasing from 18,000 to 36,000, or about 26 per cent of children under four.[16] In Scotland, the offer of 600 hours of early learning and childcare was extended to disadvantaged two-year olds in 2014 and from 2015 covered all families who met the eligibility criteria for free school meals, about a quarter of all two-year olds in Scotland.[17]

[16] https://gov.wales/flying-start

[17] https://www.gov.scot/publications/drivers-barriers-uptake-early-learning-childcare-amongst-2-year-olds/

Whilst evaluating the effects of the different two-year old offers in England, Wales and Scotland is beyond the scope of this report, there are noteworthy differences in take-up of the childcare offers. Take-up is highest in Wales at about 88 per cent[18], about 70 per cent in England[19] and much lower at 11 per cent in Scotland.[20]

In Northern Ireland, approximately 39,000 children aged 0-3 in the most disadvantaged areas can access the Sure Start programme which provides targeted educational support as part of a wider set of health and family services.[21] Within a core framework, the precise nature of the programme is shaped by the 38 Sure Start projects based upon local needs. The Sure Start programme includes the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year olds which is delivered by all 38 projects.

A recent evaluation of the Sure Start programme examined the range of services provided across Northern Ireland. This showed that over 90 per cent of eligible families were registered with Sure Start projects and there was excess demand for the Developmental Programme for 2-3 year olds in all cases[22]. Children aged 0-4 at risk of educational underachievement are supported by the Pathway Fund and Traveller children aged 0-4 receive support through the Toybox project.

3. School system

In this section, we provide a brief overview of how the school systems across the UK are organised, including school starting and leaving ages and the options available at different stages, summarised in Figure 3.1. Most of these differences are longstanding historical differences, which have not changed significantly since devolution. The next section complements this by discussing differences in school governance and autonomy across the UK.

Reflecting their common history, there is a high degree of similarity between England and Wales in terms of the structure of the school system. Children in both countries start school in Reception in the academic year in which they turn five. Pupils are therefore generally between age 4 years and 0 months and 5 years and 0 months when they start school in England and Wales. Children continue in primary schools between age 5 and 11 for school years Reception through to year 6. They then continue in secondary schools from ages 11 through to 16 in years 7 to 11 (or up to age 18 or year 13 if they continue in a school sixth form). This broad age structure of schooling has been little altered over time. The only exception being the emergence of all-through schools (or 'middle schools' as they are called in Wales, slightly confusingly) covering all age groups. These now account for two per cent of pupils in England[23] and four per cent of pupils in Wales.[24]

There are differences in the types of schools employed across England and Wales. The main change has been the emergence of Academies in England, which are described in the next section on governance

[18] https://gov.wales/flying-start-april-2018-march-2019
[19] Britton, J, Farquharson, C. Sibieta, L., Tahir, I. and Waltmann, B. (2020), 2020 *Annual Report on Education Spending*, Institute for Fiscal Studies (https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15150)
[20] https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland-no-10-2019-edition/pages/6/
[21] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/sure-start
[22] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/final-report-review-of-sure-start.pdf
[23] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics
[24] https://gov.wales/schools-census-results-january-2020

and autonomy. However, there are also two other noteworthy differences. First, there remains just over 160 grammar schools in England, mainly concentrated in a small number of areas that maintain a selective education system, e.g. Kent, Buckinghamshire and Gloucestershire. In these selective areas, an average of 25 per cent of pupils attend grammar schools, though this varies between 10 and 40 per cent across local authorities.[25] There tends to be large socio-economic divides in terms of who attends grammar schools, with only 3 per cent of grammar school pupils eligible for free school meals, as compared with 17-18 per cent across other schools in selective areas. Second, schools in Wales can teach in English, Welsh or a combination. About 23 per cent of pupils in Wales were taught in Welsh-medium schools in 2020.[26]

There are some slight differences to the structure of the school system in Scotland. Pupils start school slightly later (between ages 4 ½ and 5 ½). Schooling then consists of primary (years P1-P7) and secondary school (S1-S4, or up to S6 if they chose to continue in school after age 16).[27] This broad structure of schooling has been largely unchanged over time, with the exception that S6 has become more common. The share of pupils in Scotland staying on to S6 (as a proportion of those in S4 two years earlier) has risen from about 44 per cent in the early 2000s to over 60 per cent at the latest count.[28] We discuss this in more detail in the exams and assessments section.

The structure of schooling in Northern Ireland also differs from the rest of the UK. Pupils are generally between age 4-and-2-months and age 5-and-2-months when they start school.[29] Pupils then continue in primary schools for years P1-P7 and post-primary schools for years 8-12 (or up to year 14 if they continue in sixth form).

There are large differences in school types and governance between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. This partly reflects a history of religious and community divisions in Northern Ireland. For example, about 94-95 per cent of pupils at Catholic Maintained schools identify as Catholic. At Controlled Schools, about 60-70 per cent identify at Protestant, about 10 per cent as Catholic and the remainder as other or no religion.[30] The specific differences in school governance structures are described in more detail in the following section.

In Northern Ireland, post-primary or secondary education is largely selective with pupils taking transfer tests in order to determine access to grammar schools or other schools. About 43 per cent of post-primary pupils attend a grammar school (see Figure 4.2). This is much larger than the 25 per cent of pupils attending grammar schools in selective areas of England. Grammar schools therefore cover a wider share of pupils in Northern Ireland. This partly results from a deliberate reform in 1989 to increase grammar school admissions (with the share of pupils attending a grammar school increasing from 31 per cent in 1985 to 35 in 1989[31]) and further gradual increases over the last thirty years. As with state-funded grammar schools in England, there is large socio-economic variation in terms of who attends a

[25] https://www.ifs.org.uk/docs/Grammar_Schools2013.pdf
[26] https://gov.wales/schools-census-results-january-2020
[27] https://education.gov.scot/parentzone/my-school/general-school-information/attending-school/
[28] https://www.gov.scot/publications/pupil-census-supplementary-statistics/
[29] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-starting-age-guide-parents
[30] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data
[31] Guyon, N. Maurin, E. and McNally S. (2012). *The Effect of Tracking Students by Ability into Different Schools: A Natural Experiment*, Journal of Human Resources, University of Wisconsin Press, vol. 47(3), pages 684-721.

grammar school, with about 14 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals at grammar schools, compared with 37 per cent in other post-primary or secondary schools.[32]

Figure 3.1: Overview of school systems across UK

	Primary Schools	Secondary schools	Post-16 Education
England	Start school: age 4 to 5 Reception-Y6 (age 4 to 11)	Age 11-16 (Y7-Y11)	Education Leaving Age of 18 School Sixth Form (Y12/Y13), Further Education or Sixth Form College, Apprenticeship
	Some all-through schools, growth in Academies		
Wales	Start school: age 4 to 5 Reception-Y6 (age 4 to 11)	Age 11-16 (Y7-Y11)	School Leaving Age of 16 School Sixth Form (Y12/Y13), Further Education or Sixth Form College, Apprenticeship
	Welsh-medium schools, some all-through schools		
Scotland	Start school: age 4 1/2 to 5 1/2 P1-P7 (age 4 to 12)	Age 12-16 (S1-S4)	School Leaving Age of 16 Continue to S5/S6, Further Education College, Apprenticeship
Northern Ireland	Start school: age 4&2mths to 5&2mths P1-P7 (age 4 to 12)	Age 11-17 (Y8-Y12) Mostly selective	School Leaving Age of 16 Continue to Y13/Y14, Further Education College, Apprenticeship
	Mostly segregated by religion, some integrated school, some Irish-medium schools		

Post-16 system

Up until 2013, the school leaving age was 16 right across the UK. However, the education leaving age was increased to 18 from 2013 onwards in England. This meant that young people in England had to continue in full-time or part-time education or training through to age 18.[33]

The school or education leaving age has not been changed elsewhere in the UK. In Wales, young people can leave school at the end of year 11 as long as they turn 16 by the end of the school year. In Scotland,

[32] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data
[33] https://www.gov.uk/know-when-you-can-leave-school

young people can leave at the end of S4 if they turn 16 between 1 March and 30 September. Otherwise, they must stay in school until the Christmas holidays of S5. In Northern Ireland, children are required to complete 12 years of compulsory education. They can leave at the end of year 12 if they turn 16 between 1 September and 1 July. Children born between 2 July and 31 August cannot leave until the following June.[34]

Despite this difference, there is a large degree of similarity across the UK in terms of the post-16 education options available to young people. They can continue in school up to about age 18, move to a further education or sixth form college, or take an apprenticeship. The main difference is that young people in Scotland can, in principle, leave school at age 17 or the end of S5 to start 4-year university courses.

4. School governance and autonomy

There are large differences in school governance models and structures across the countries of the UK. In what follows, we briefly set out the overall structures before then examining what this means in terms of the levels of autonomy and responsibilities for schools and different levels of government in various areas of school decisions.

School governance structures

As summarised in Figure 4.1, the different models of school governance and school types differ markedly across the UK.

Schools in England possess the highest levels of autonomy. Academies and Free Schools possess very high levels of autonomy, with freedom to set their own admissions arrangements (subject to legislation), freedom to deviate from national pay and conditions for staff, and freedom to deviate from the national curriculum. Academies began to be set up in the early 2000s as replacements for old schools with poor educational results, but have substantially grown in number since schools could convert to Academy status from 2010 onwards. Academies now account for about 37 per cent of primary school pupils and about 87 per cent of secondary school pupils.[35] Free Schools can be set up as new schools with very similar freedoms to Academies. Studio schools and university technical colleges, which focus on vocational, technical and practical skills, have similar freedoms to Academies and Free Schools.

Even local-authority-maintained schools have high levels of autonomy in England. All state-funded schools have increased freedoms over teacher pay and progression since 2013. Funding changes over the last two decades have also put more budgetary responsibility in the hands of individual headteachers and schools (see section 5 on 'Funding'). Foundation, voluntary-aided and voluntary-controlled schools also have freedoms over admissions arrangements.

This increased school autonomy has been a policy priority for policymakers in England for at least 20 years and the changes reflect a desire to put more decisions in the hands of individual schools and to create a diverse quasi-market for schools.

[34] https://www.gov.uk/know-when-you-can-leave-school
[35] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2020

One feature that runs slightly counter to increased levels of individual school autonomy is the increasing role played by Multiple Academy Trusts (MATs), which act as the governing body for groups of Academies. MATs play a substantial role in determining all aspects of school-decision making, including pay, conditions, the curriculum and budgetary decisions. Indeed, about three quarters of Academies are part of a MAT, though these vary in their size.[36]

School governance structures in Wales have not been subject to substantial changes since devolution and, in many ways, are broadly similar to the models in place in England up to the early 2000s. In contrast to England, there has not been a focus on increasing school autonomy or creating a quasi-market for schools. As in England, community schools are maintained and controlled by local authorities, who act as the employing and admissions authority. Voluntary-controlled schools are governed by voluntary organisations (usually religious), but are closely controlled by local authorities who are also the employing and admissions authority. Voluntary-aided Schools have more autonomy with the governing body (again usually religious) acting as employing and admissions authority. Foundation schools are also governed by voluntary organisations, who are the admissions and employing authority. However, all publicly-funded schools must follow national pay and conditions, as well as the national curriculum. In practice, there is also a high level of coordination of all publicly-funded schools within a local authority.

The main innovation on governance in Wales has been the creation of 'Pioneer Schools' from 2016 onwards[37]. These Pioneer Schools have freedoms to innovate on the curriculum and professional development in preparation for the national roll out of the new curriculum from 2022.

Across both England and Wales, school governors play a crucial role in the management of individual schools, such as determining admissions policies, hiring/firing staff and many other aspects of school life.

School governance models in Scotland are less complex than other parts of the UK, with local authorities playing a substantial role in the management and governance of almost all publicly-funded schools, which has changed little over time. The only exception is grant-aided schools, which are self-governing and funded directly by the Scottish Government. There are only eight of these schools, seven of which are special schools. The main change in Scotland has been a reduced role for school governors (or 'School Boards'). School boards used to play a similar role to school governors in England and Wales, but these were abolished in 2006. They were replaced with two tier parent councils (mostly small consultative body of parents) and parent forums (a wider consultative body of parents)[38]

[36] https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/performance-academy-local-authorities-2017/
[37] https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/schools-charged-developing-wales-new-10392096
[38] https://education.gov.scot/parentzone/getting-involved/parent-councils/about-parent-councils

Figure 4.1: School governance structures across UK

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Highly autonomous schools	**Academies, Free Schools, UTCs and Studio Schools** *(large freedoms over pay, condtions, staff, curriculum & admissions)*		**Grant-aided schools** *(own governance, mostly special schools)*	**Voluntary Schools** *(funded by Education Authority, managed by board of governors, mostly old fee-paying grammar schools)* **Grant maintained integrated schools** *(similar to voluntary schools, but integrated)*
Other schools	**Foundation, Voluntary-aided, Voluntary-controlled & Community schools** *(some freedoms on pay & admissions)*	**Foundation, Voluntary-aided, Voluntary-controlled & Community schools** *(some freedoms on admissions)* **Pioneer Schools** *(freedoms to develop curriculum & professional development)*	**Publicly-funded schools** *(large role for local authorities in funding, governance and admissions)*	**Controlled schools** *(managed and funded by EA through board of governors, EA as employing authority, majority protestant pupils)* **Catholic Maintained Schools** *(managed by board of governors, funded by EA, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools as employing authority)* **Other Maintained Schools** *(mostly Irish-Medium or integrated schools)* **Controlled Integrated** *(run like controlled schools, but integrated)*
Key Regional / National Bodies	**Regional School Commissioners** *(provide oversight and support to under-performing schools, large role in Academy conversions and creation of free schools)*	**Regional Consortia** *(collaboation bewteen local authorities, school improvement, professioal devepment)*	**Education Scotland** *(arms length executive agency, school improvements, school inspections)*	**Education Authority (EA)** *(replaced old Education & Library Boards, responsible for provision of schooling, often the funding and employing authority)*

There is a more complex set of school governance structures in Northern Ireland, which reflects the range of school management types and the continuation of a selective state secondary system. Figure 4.2 shows the proportion of primary and secondary school pupils attending the different school types.

Controlled schools are managed by a board of governors acting on behalf of the Education Authority, which funds controlled schools and acts as the employer. They are mainly attended by pupils identifying

as protestant, with about 45 per cent of primary school pupils attending controlled schools. However, about 2 per cent of primary and secondary school pupils attend controlled integrated schools. At secondary level, some controlled schools are grammar schools, which account for about 10 per cent of secondary school pupils.

Figure 4.2: School governance structures across Northern Ireland in 2020/21

	Per cent of primary pupils	Per cent of secondary pupils
Controlled	45%	21%
Controlled Integrated	2%	2%
Controlled Grammar	n/a	10%
Catholic Maintained	45%	26%
Other Maintained	2%	1%
Voluntary - Catholic Management	0%	20%
Voluntary - Other Management	1%	14%
Grant Maintained Integrated	4%	7%

Notes and sources: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Catholic maintained schools are managed by a board of governors and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools is the employer, though they are funded by the Education Authority. Catholic maintained schools account for 45 per cent of primary school pupils and 26 per cent of secondary school pupils. In addition, there are a small number of pupils who attend other maintained schools, which are similar in governance structure to Catholic Maintained Schools and which are mostly Irish-medium.

Voluntary schools are managed by a board of governors and were historically fee-paying schools. They are now all grammar schools (or grammar school preparatory departments), funded by the Education Authority and can either be under Catholic or other management. They have more autonomy than controlled or maintained schools. In total, they account for just over one third of secondary school pupils. Finally, grant-maintained integrated schools are run in a similar way to voluntary schools, but are integrated and account for about 7 per cent of secondary school pupils.

Rising role of regional and national agencies

Looking across the UK, one common theme has been the emergence of regional or national agencies in governance and support structures. Whilst these agencies have taken very different forms and responsibilities, there has also been a common focus on school improvement.

In England and Wales, regional bodies have emerged over the last decade. In England, Regional School Commissioners provide oversight and support to under-performing schools. They are also heavily involved in approving conversion to Academy status and new free schools. In Wales, four Regional Consortia were created in 2012 to coordinate school improvement support across local authorities.[39] They also now have responsibility for professional development and for distributing various grants to schools.

[39] Evans, G. (2021). *Back to the future? Reflections on three phases of education policy reform in Wales and their implications for teachers,* Journal of Educational Change

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, national agencies with broad responsibilities have emerged. Education Scotland was formed in 2011 as a merger between four different predecessor agencies (Learning and Teaching Scotland, HM Inspectorate of Education, the National Continuing Professional Development Team and the Scottish Government's Positive Behaviour Team).[40] As a result, Education Scotland has very broad responsibilities, including: school improvement; implementation of the new curriculum; professional development; and inspecting schools. The fact that Education Scotland has responsibilities for school improvement, the curriculum and for inspecting schools is a novelty in the UK. In the rest of the UK, the agency responsible for inspections is kept separate from those responsible for school improvement and the curriculum. In addition, 'Regional Improvement Collaboratives' were established in 2018 to facilitate greater collaboration between local authorities and Education Scotland on school improvement within given regions.[41]

In Northern Ireland, the creation of the Education Authority in 2015 replaced the old Education and Library Boards, effectively replacing five local authorities with a single authority. It has broad responsibilities for the provision of education and youth services, the funding authority for all schools, the employer of teachers in controlled schools and non-teaching staff in schools (other than voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated), and oversees the provision of education services including admissions to all school. In contrast to Education Scotland, it is not responsible for inspections, which are the responsibility of the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Perceptions of responsibilities across schools and government

To illustrate differences across countries in governance structures, Figure 4.3 uses the PISA headteacher survey data to compare variation in perceptions of who is responsible for hiring and firing school staff. As an important feature of school governance, this provides a useful example of how important decisions are made that directly affect schools (and the pupils that attend them).

Figure 4.3. A comparison of who has responsibility for hiring and firing staff in the UK

Who has a considerable responsibility for hiring and firing staff	England	NI	Wales	Scotland
Hiring staff				
Headteacher	98%	73%*	94%*	96%
Teachers	31%	12%*	30%	14%*
Governing board	53%	91%*	85%*	19%*
Regional/local education authority	3%	10%*	7%*	42%*
National government	0%	2%*	0%	1%
Firing staff				
Headteacher	89%	47%*	78%*	31%*
Teachers	1%	0%	0%	0%
Governing board	77%	86%*	93%*	3%*
Regional/local education authority	16%	31%*	39%*	84%*
National government	1%	18%*	3%*	15%*

Notes: * indicates statistically significant difference from England at the five percent level. Data pooled between PISA 2006 and 2015.

Four key points stand out. First, headteachers in Northern Ireland have less responsibility for hiring and firing staff than their English and Welsh counterparts. The situation for Scotland is more mixed, with the

[40] https://www.education.gov.scot/documents/ES-corporate-plan.pdf
[41] https://spice-spotlight.scot/2020/01/06/rics/

vast majority of headteachers having considerable responsibility for hiring – but not firing – staff. Second, as one would expect given the abolition of school boards, governing boards have significantly less responsibility for staffing in Scotland than the rest of the UK. Third, local and regional government have a more prominent role in school staffing decisions in Scotland than Wales, Northern Ireland and (particularly) England. This reflects the larger level of individual school autonomy in England. Finally, whereas national government have no role in individual school staffing decisions in England and Wales, a minority of schools report they do in Northern Ireland (18 per cent) and Scotland (15 per cent).

Figure 4.4 performs a similar comparison in terms of teacher pay. There are clear differences across the UK in the power held by headteachers. The vast majority of headteachers in England report that they have considerable responsibility for starting pay (83 per cent). This is significantly more than in Wales (62 per cent) and, in particular, Northern Ireland (23 per cent) and Scotland (4 per cent). Indeed, it seems that in Northern Ireland and, particularly, Scotland the national government holds much greater responsibilities for teacher salaries. Broadly the same finding holds with respect to pay rises. This further illustrates how the responsibilities of headteachers – and of the national government - vary across the four constituent nations with respect to teacher pay.

Two further features of the table are worthy of comment. First, it helps to reiterate the weak role of governing boards in Scotland. For instance, only 4 per cent of headteachers in Scotland say that a governing board holds considerable responsibility over starting pay, compared to half of those in England (51 per cent) and almost two-thirds in Wales (63 per cent). Second, in all four corners of the UK, regional / local education authorities have a limited role in determining teacher pay. Though, with respect to starting salaries, there are some notable differences between Wales (36 per cent of headteachers say regional government have considerable responsibility for determining teachers starting pay), compared to 23 per cent in Scotland, 15 per cent in Northern Ireland and 13 per cent in England.

Figure 4.4. A comparison of who has responsibility for teacher pay across the UK

Who has a considerable responsibility for teachers' salaries	England	NI	Wales	Scotland
Starting pay				
Headteacher	83%	23%*	62%*	4%*
Teachers	0%	0%	0%	0%
Governing board	51%	39%*	63%*	4%*
Regional/local education authority	13%	15%	36%*	23%*
National government	21%	68%*	30%*	81%*
Pay rises				
Headteacher	86%	39%*	71%*	3%*
Teachers	6%	0%*	2%*	0%*
Governing board	75%	60%*	82%*	4%*
Regional/local education authority	6%	9%	16%*	19%*
National government	15%	57%*	24%*	84%*

Notes: * indicates statistically significant difference from England at the five percent level. Data pooled between PISA 2006 and 2015.

Finally, Figure 4.5 turns to how admissions criteria into secondary schools compares across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. The main point of difference is Northern Ireland standing out from the rest of the UK. Note how the area in which a family lives is less important in Northern Ireland (e.g. 63 per cent of headteachers in Northern Ireland said that this factor is considered in school admissions, compared to 79 per cent in England), while pupil's prior academic performance is more important (e.g. 59

per cent of headteachers considered this in school admissions in Northern Ireland, compared to 26 per cent in England). This is unsurprising, given that the grammar school system remains in place across Northern Ireland as a whole. The other point of interesting variation in school admissions is the priority given to family members of current or existing pupils. Such criteria is much more common in England (75 per cent) and Northern Ireland (82 per cent), than in Wales (43 per cent) and Scotland (41 per cent).

Figure 4.5. A comparison of school admission considerations across the UK

How often are the following factors are considered when students are admitted to your school?	England	NI	Wales	Scotland
Residence in a particular area	79%	63%*	71%*	82%
Student's record of academic performance	26%	59%*	21%*	17%*
Recommendation of feeder schools	34%	54%*	41%*	37%
Parents' endorsement of the instructional or religious philosophy of the school	26%	37%*	29%	20%
Whether the student requires or is interested in a special programme	38%	52%*	45%*	42%
Preference given to family members of current or former students	75%	82%*	43%*	41%*

Notes: * indicates statistically significant difference from England at the five percent level. Data pooled between PISA 2009 and 2018.

Summary

At the point of devolution, England and Wales started off with broadly similar governance structures. Since then, individual schools in England have gained significant levels of autonomy over staffing and teacher pay, particularly as more and more schools have become Academies. In Wales, governance structures have not been significantly altered and local authorities retain more control than in England. In both England and Wales, school governors retain significant influence on school decisions.

In Scotland, local authorities and national government play a much more significant role in school decisions. The role of school governors has also been reduced over time, with school boards replaced by consultative parent councils.

School governance structures in Northern Ireland differ markedly from the rest of the UK. Governing boards play a key role in school decisions and national government retains a strong influence. Northern Ireland also stands out as the only nation of the UK to maintain a selective state secondary schooling system, and a much larger share of pupils attend grammar schools (43 per cent) than in selective areas of England (about 25 per cent). As one would expect, school admissions are more likely to reflect pupil ability levels in Northern Ireland.

One key development common across all four nations has been the emergence of national and regional agencies in school governance structures. In Northern Ireland, the Education Authority has taken on the roles and responsibilities of the old Education and Library boards. Education Scotland plays a very substantial role in school improvement, development of the curriculum and through responsibility for school inspections. In Wales, regional consortia play a strong coordinating role in school improvement and professional development across local authorities. In England, regional school commissioners and Multi-Academy Trusts have come to play key roles in the management of Academies and Free Schools.

5. Funding

In this section, we compare school funding levels and structures across the four nations of the UK. This includes levels of spending per pupil and what this delivers in terms of resources, the relative role of schools and local authorities in the system, and the extent of funding focused on more disadvantaged pupils. An overall comparative summary is provided in Figure 5.1 below, which we then discuss in more detail in individual sub-sections.

Figure 5.1: Summary of school funding structures across UK

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Spending per pupil (2019-20)	£6,135	£6,133	£7,275	£5,828
Overall structure of system	Ring-fenced fundings; Allocations to schools through LA formulae; Movement to national funding formula	Part of local government settlement; Allocations to schools through LA formulae	Part of local government settlement; Allocations to schools through LA formulae	Education Authority allocates money to schools through common funding scheme
Spending share delegated to schools	91%	84%	66%	60%
Funding focused on disadvantaged pupils	**Pupil Premium**: £1345 (primary) & £955 (secondary) for pupils ever eligible for FSM (6 yrs); Additional funding through LA funding formulae	**Pupil Development Grant**: £1150 for pupils ever eligible for FSM (2 yrs); Additional funding through LA funding formulae	**Pupil Equity Fund**: £1200 for pupils eligible for FSM in P1-S3; Additional funding through LA funding formulae	Social deprivation funding through common funding scheme: rimary schools (£642 to £1,335 extra); post-primary Schools (£379 to £967 extra)

Notes and sources: Spending per pupil figures for all four nations and delegation spending share taken from IFS 2020 Annual Report on Education Spending in England; Delegation share for Wales taken from Local Authority Budgeted Expenditure on Schools in Wales 2020-21; Delegation share for Scotland based on sum devolved to headteachers as a share of net expenditure and taken from Scottish Local Government 2019-20 Provisional Outturn and 2020-21 Budget Estimates – Revenue; Spending share delegated to schools in Northern Ireland relates to Schools' Delegated Budget as a share of total expenditure and taken from Education Authority Annual Report and Accounts for 2018-19. Common Funding Scheme, 2020-21

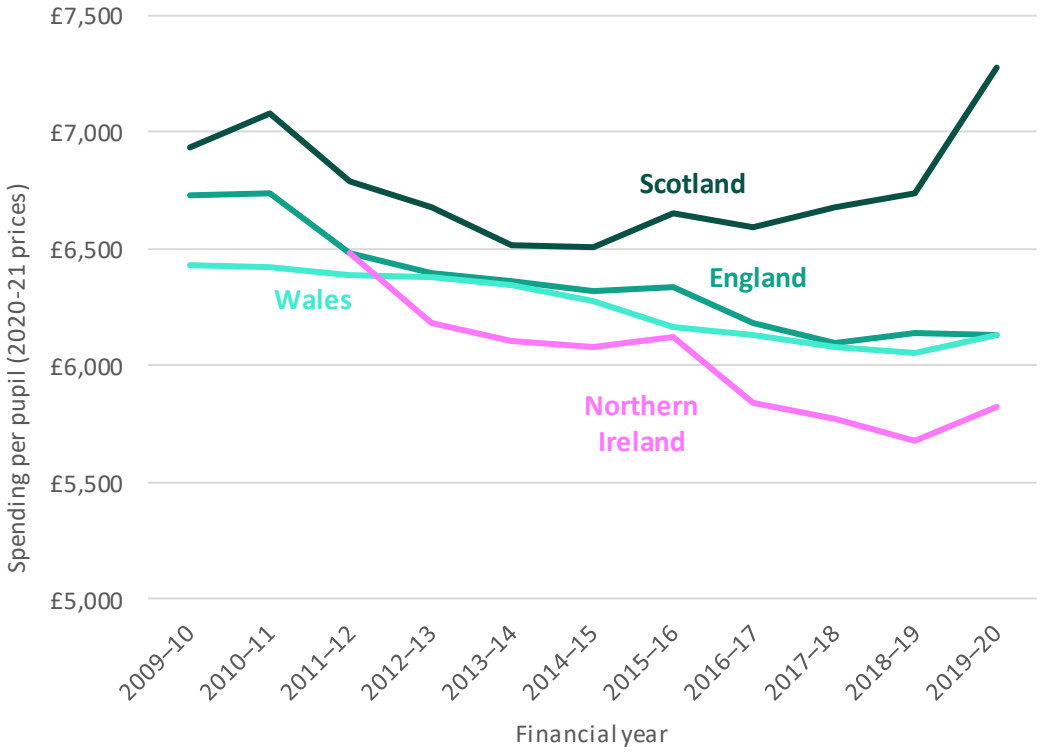
Overall funding and resources

As shown in Figure 5.1, school spending per pupil was extremely similar in England and Wales in 2019-20 at just over £6,100 per pupil. Spending per pupil was highest in Scotland at £7,300 per pupil and lowest in Northern Ireland at about £5,800 per pupil. This includes all spending at the school and local authority level (or Education Authority in the case of Northern Ireland), including extra funding for disadvantaged pupils such as the Pupil Premium.

As further demonstrated in Figure 5.2, these rankings in spending per pupil have been very similar over the last ten years, though the scale of the differences has changed over time. Since 2009-10, school spending per pupil has fallen by about 5 per cent in real-terms in Wales, by about 9 per cent in England and by about 10 per cent in Northern Ireland (the latter only going back to 2011-12). In contrast, spending per pupil in Scotland was about 5 per cent higher in real-terms than in 2009-10. Spending per pupil did fall in Scotland up to about 2015, but then rose by about 10 per cent in total between 2017-18 and 2019-20. This increase mostly reflects the Scottish government's decision to increase teacher pay scales by 7 per cent from April 2019 (with a further increase of 3 per cent backdated to April 2018).[42]

The relatively low spending figures for Northern Ireland can partly be explained by delays in agreeing teacher pay awards. The teacher pay awards for 2017 and 2018 were not agreed and paid until the 2020-21 financial year. The 2020 pay award was not agreed until March 2021 and will not be paid until the 2021-22 financial year. As such, this has had a negative impact upon the school spend per pupil figure for these years in comparison to other regions.

Figure 5.2: Summary of school funding levels across UK over time



Notes and sources: IFS 2020 Annual Report on Education Spending in England

How does this translate into actual resources? Figure 5.3 helps to answer this question by looking at changes in the pupil:teacher ratio over time in primary and secondary schools.[43] As can be seen, pupil:teacher ratios are much lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK, meaning there are fewer pupils for every teacher. For example, the pupil:teacher ratio in primary schools in Scotland was 16 in Scotland in 2019-20 (compared with 21 or higher in the other nations) and about 12 in secondary schools (compared with 16 or over in the other nations). This clearly fits with the higher level of spending per

[42] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-47487093
[43] Note that there is variation in the coverage and scope of the data collection between territories.

pupil in Scotland. Despite recent changes, there has also been a long-term decline in the pupil:teacher ratio in Scotland over the last 25 years, particularly in primary schools.

Across Wales, England and Northern Ireland, there is greater similarity in the current level of the pupil:teacher ratio, though there are some differences in the trends over time. The pupil:teacher ratio is highest in primary schools in Northern Ireland (22.5), which fits with the lower level of spending per pupil. It has also been rising over time, including a significant rise in recent years, reflecting the larger declines in spending per pupil. The pupil:teacher ratio has also been rising in secondary schools in Northern Ireland over time, though is still a bit lower than in Wales and England.

In Wales, the pupil:teacher ratio has risen significantly in primary schools as spending cuts have taken effect (from about 20 in 2010 to 22 in 2019), taking it back to a higher level than in 2000 and similar to 1995. The pupil:teacher ratio has also risen in secondary schools in Wales in recent years, from about 16 in 2013 to the present level of 17. This is the highest across all four nations and higher than seen in Wales in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

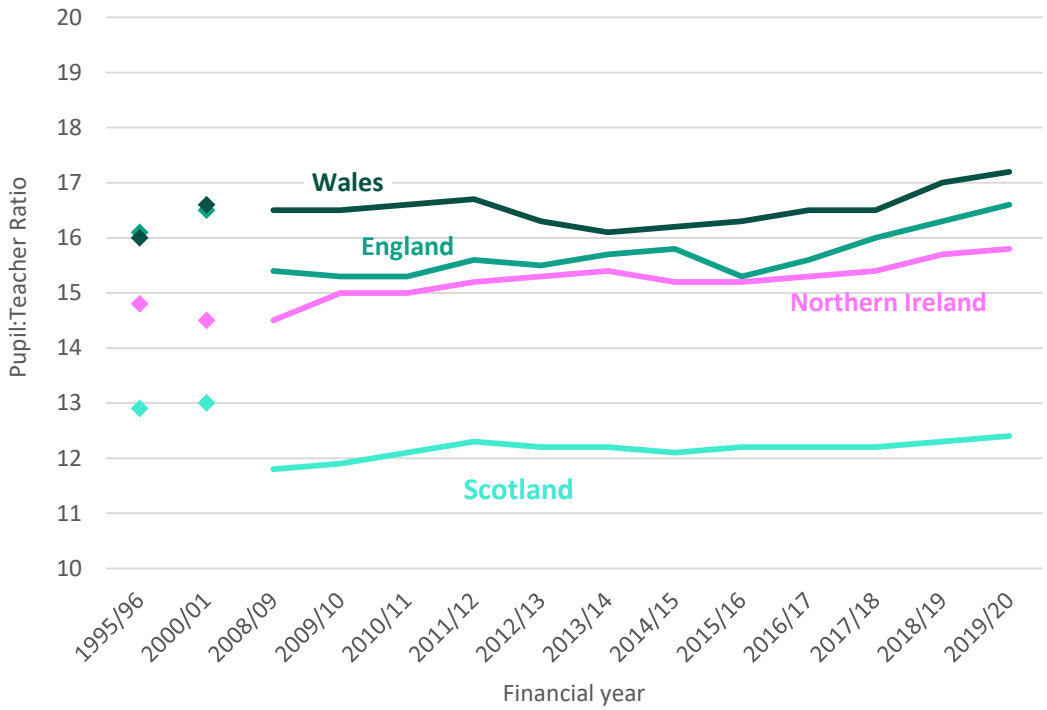
In England, the changes have been slightly less dramatic over time. The pupil:teacher ratio fell over the 2000s in both primary and secondary schools during the period of spending increases. It has remained broadly stable in primary schools since 2010 but has risen in secondary schools back up to the level of the early 2000s. This fits with a picture of higher spending cuts in secondary schools than in primary schools in England.[44]

Figure 5.3. A UK comparison of pupil:teacher ratios

a) Primary Schools

[44] https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15150

b) Secondary Schools



Source: Education and Training Statistics for the UK 2011, 2016 and 2020 (https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-education-and-training)

Up until recently, teacher pay was generally very similar across all four nations, despite it being a devolved matter for Scotland and Northern Ireland. For example, for the 2018-19 academic year, teacher starting salaries were around £23-24,000 across all four countries (excluding the London area).[45] Since then, teacher pay has risen significantly in Scotland, with teacher starting salaries standing at £27,500 in 2020-21. Following devolution of teacher pay in Wales in 2019, teacher starting salaries have risen to £27,000 in 2020-21. In England, there have been smaller rises in recent years, with starting salaries about £25,700 in England in 2020-21 (excluding London). In the case of Northern Ireland, backdated pay awards of two per cent per year in 2019-20 and 2020-21 were only agreed in March 2021. This agreement would take starting salaries to just over £24,000 in 2020-21, the lowest across the UK.[46]

Structure of system

In the early 2000s, the overall structure of the school funding system was similar across all four nations of the UK. School spending levels were decided by local authorities, with funding provided through the local government funding settlement in each nation and through local taxation. The main difference was in Northern Ireland, where funding was provided to Education and Library Boards, whose focus was on providing education and related services. This system gave local authorities substantial freedom in determining overall spending levels – which could be lower or higher than estimates of spending needs in the local government funding settlement – and the distribution across individual schools in their area (subject to certain rules and conditions).

Since then, there have been substantial changes to the structure of the systems in Northern Ireland and England. In Northern Ireland, a 'Common Funding Scheme' was introduced in 2005, which replaced the

[45] https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/advice/pay-pensions/pay-scales.html
[46] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/joint-statement-teachers-negotiating-committee-2-march-2021

different funding formulae in place across Education and Library Boards with one single formula applying across schools in Northern Ireland. The creation of the Education Authority in 2015 meant that the funding and spending responsibilities were taken on by this new Northern Ireland wide authority. Further changes and simplifications were introduced following an independent review of the school funding system in 2013.[47] By and large, these changes were motivated by a desire to reduce complexity, provide consistency in funding across similar schools and provide more funding for disadvantaged pupils.

In England, the government introduced a ring-fenced grant for school funding in 2005-06 called the 'Dedicated Schools Grant', following on from the so-called school funding crisis of 2003-04. This set a minimum for total school spending within a given area. In 2013-14, the government introduced simpler local school funding formulae. Under this reform, the government sets out a small number of formula factors that can be used (e.g. pupils of a given age and the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals) and local authorities decide the precise value in their formulae. In 2018-19, a national funding formula for schools in England was introduced, under which the government calculates a school funding allocation for each school in England. Currently, this is only used to determine funding levels at the local authority level, but the future intention is for the national funding formula to replace all the local funding formulae. This would greatly reduce the role of local authorities in the school funding system in England. As in Northern Ireland, these changes have been mostly motivated by a desire to provide greater clarity and consistency in funding across similar schools, and to reduce complexity in the system.

In Scotland and Wales, the broad structure of the system has been little altered over time, with local authorities retaining significant control in terms of how much to spend on schools and how to distribute funding within their area. There has been a greater emphasis on local discretion.

One key difference across the four nations is the relative role of local authorities and schools in spending decisions and providing services, with a larger role for individual schools in England and Wales.

In England, over 90 per cent of school spending is delegated or devolved to individual schools, who are responsible for most financial and budget decisions in the English system. This high level of delegation to individual schools reflects pressure and efforts from successive governments to give headteachers more say in financial and budget decisions over the last 30 years. In Wales, a slightly lower share of 84 per cent of spending is delegated to individual schools, with a greater role for local authorities in spending and budget decisions. This share has increased over time, from a low of about 75 per cent in 2010-11. This increase partly reflects a Welsh Government target to increase the share of funding delegated to schools to 85 per cent. Whilst this target was never quite hit, the amount of funding delegated to schools has clearly risen.

The share of funding and spending delegated to individual schools is much lower in Scotland (66 per cent) and in Northern Ireland (60 per cent). In Scotland, local authorities play a very substantial role in staffing and other financial decisions. Whilst in Northern Ireland, the Education Authority is responsible for the provision of a large range of educational services and spending decisions.

These differences in responsibilities are, to some extent, borne out by data from PISA. While the vast majority of headteachers across all four countries say that they have considerable responsibility for *allocating* school budgets, there are clear differences in *formulating* the budget. Most notably, headteachers in England (88 per cent) and Wales (82 per cent) are more likely to say that they have considerable responsibility for formulating budgets than their Northern Irish (57 per cent) and Scottish (29 per cent) counterparts. On the other hand, regional/local government have a much more prominent role in Scotland (87 per cent of headteachers state that this is the case), than in Wales (44 per cent), Northern

[47] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/independent-review-common-funding-scheme-1

Ireland (30 per cent) and England (24 per cent). Northern Ireland also stands out from the other three countries in terms of national government assuming greater responsibility for formulating school budgets. This makes sense given the extensive role played by the Education Authority of Northern Ireland.

Figure 5.4. UK comparison of who has responsibility for formulating and allocating school budgets

Who has considerable responsibility for formulating and allocating school budgets?	England	NI	Wales	Scotland
Formulating school budget				
Headteacher	88%	57%*	82%*	29%*
Teachers	4%	2%	2%	2%
Governing board	78%	56%*	82%	8%*
Regional/local education authority	24%	30%	44%*	87%*
National government	9%	37%*	8%	9%
Allocating school budget				
Headteacher	98%	91%*	96%	97%
Teachers	8%	9%	12%	16%*
Governing board	52%	58%	69%*	11%*
Regional/local education authority	2%	1%	5%*	16%*
National government	0%	2%*	0%	2%

Notes: * indicates statistically significant difference from England at the five percent level. Data pooled between PISA 2006 and 2015.

Funding for disadvantaged pupils

All across the UK, school funding systems provide more funding to schools with more disadvantaged pupils in order to help reduce inequalities.

Since 2010, England, Wales and Scotland have all introduced specific and highly visible funding streams targeted at disadvantaged pupils in an effort to reduce the attainment gap. These differ slightly in their scope and structure. In Scotland, the Pupil Equity Fund provides £1,200 for each pupil eligible for free school meals in years P1-S3, covering about 17 per cent of pupils aged 4 to 14 years old.[48] In Wales, the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) was introduced in 2012 (previously the Pupil Deprivation Grant). It provides £1,150 to pupils eligible for free school meals in the past 2 years, covering over 20 per cent of pupils aged 5 to 15.[49] In England, the Pupil Premium was introduced in 2011. The amount now varies by stage of education with £1,345 for primary school pupils eligible for free school meals in the past 6 years (covering about 22 per cent of primary school pupils) and £955 in secondary schools (covering 27 per cent of secondary school pupils).[50]

In addition, there are a number of related funding streams for other pupils, including those experiencing disadvantage. Early years equivalents of the PDG in Wales and Pupil Premium in England were introduced in 2015. In Scotland, Wales and England, extra funding is also available for children in care. In Wales, further grants are available through the PDG for access to education, e.g. grants for school uniform.

[48] https://www.gov.scot/publications/pupil-census-supplementary-statistics/
[49] https://gov.wales/schools-census-results
[50] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium-allocations-and-conditions-of-grant-2020-to-2021

The amounts provided via the Pupil Premium, PDG and Pupil Equity Fund are perhaps the most visible extra amounts of funding for disadvantaged pupils. However, further funding is also provided through core funding formulae across all four nations. Making comparisons and quantifying the amounts provided through core funding formulae are difficult in practice, however, given the complexity of the formulae and the different ways in which funding is allocated.

The simpler school funding formulae introduced in England in 2013 were intended to allow for greater transparency on how funding reaches individual schools. Analysis of these funding formulae shows that about 9 per cent of core school funding is allocated on the basis of deprivation factors.[51] Considering this relates to over £36bn of schools funding, this amounts to over £3bn in funding for deprivation, more than double the amount provided through the Pupil Premium.

Getting a handle on the precise amounts allocated on the basis of deprivation is harder in Wales and Scotland, given the complexity of the systems (both at national and local level). In Wales, a recent review of school funding concluded that funding for deprivation was lower than it is England and called for more funding to be allocated on the basis of deprivation as part of a simpler school funding system.[52] In Scotland, a recent government consultation criticised the current system as too complicated and also called for more funding to be allocated on the basis of social deprivation.[53]

In Northern Ireland, deprivation funding in the core school funding formula (the 'Common Funding Formula') is the sole source of funding for disadvantaged pupils. In 2013, the Salisbury Review criticised the Common Funding Formula for not allocating enough funding on the basis of social deprivation.[54] At present, the formula allocates about 7 per cent of nursery and primary school funding and 5 per cent of secondary school funding on the basis of social deprivation factors or prior educational attainment.[55] This compares with about 3 per cent of the total schools budget before the Salisbury review in 2012-13.[56]

Given these figures it seems highly likely that the English school funding system allocates more funding in total on the basis of social deprivation than occurs in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The English system also allows for transparency in how social deprivation funding is allocated.

Headteachers' views of resources

PISA data can be used to compare the views of headteachers across the UK in terms of their views on school resourcing. Specifically, in PISA, headteachers are asked whether their school's ability to provide effective instruction is impacted by a series of staff or physical resource shortages. The results from this comparison can be found in Figure 5.5. The data is pooled across 2015 and 2018 to ensure sufficient

[51] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-block-funding-formulae-2020-to-2021
[52] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-block-funding-formulae-2020-to-2021
[53] Scottish Government (2017a) Fair funding to achieve excellence and equity in education: consultation [Online] Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/fair-funding-achieve-excellence-equity-education/

[54] Salisbury, R. (2013) An independent review of the Common Funding Scheme [Online] Available at: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/independent-review-of-cfs.pdf
[55] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/common-funding-scheme-2020-2021
[56] Salisbury, R. (2013)

sample sizes, but can be viewed as perceptions of headteachers following significant spending cuts across all four counties up to 2015.

In terms of educational materials (such as books and IT equipment) and infrastructure (such as the state of the building and heating), the views of headteachers are broadly similar across the four countries. The only exceptions are a slightly greater proportion of headteachers in Wales report a lack of – or poor quality – educational material limits their capacity to provide effective instruction, while those in Scotland are more positive about the state of physical infrastructure. Otherwise, differences across the four UK countries are minor.

There are signs of more variation when it comes to human resources. A greater percentage of headteachers in England (36 per cent) and Scotland (47 per cent) report a lack of teaching staff to be an issue compared to headteachers in Northern Ireland (26 per cent) and Wales (24 per cent). This is despite the higher pupil:teacher ratios in Wales and Northern Ireland, and much lower levels in Scotland. Interestingly, both Scotland (8 per cent) and Northern Ireland (5 per cent) had a comparatively low level of headteachers saying inadequate or poorly qualified teaching staff is an issue, which compares with 16 per cent in England and 11 per cent in Wales. In terms of assistants, the share of headteachers believing a lack of teaching assistants is a problem was highest in Scotland (39 per cent) and Wales (27 per cent), which compares with 23 per cent in Northern Ireland and 18 per cent in England.

The higher share of headteachers in Scotland reporting a lack of teachers and teaching assistants will have come before the large increases in pay implemented from 2019 onwards. Indeed, such figures might have partly motivated this change.

It is also interesting to note that headteachers in Northern Ireland do not report significantly higher problems with resources and staffing, despite lower funding per pupil and higher pupil:teacher ratios.

Figure 5.5. UK comparison of resource issues hindering school instruction across UK

Schools' capacity to provide effective instruction hindered by…..	England	NI	Wales	Scotland
Physical materials				
A lack of educational materials	28%	29%	38%*	25%
Inadequate or poor quality educational materials	24%	24%	34%*	23%
A lack of physical infrastructure	41%	45%	41%	23%*
Inadequate or poor quality physical infrastructure	39%	44%	43%	25%*
Staffing issues				
A lack of teaching staff	36%	26%*	24%*	47%*
Inadequate or poorly qualified teaching staff	16%	5%*	11%	8%*
A lack of assisting staff	18%	23%	27%*	39%*
Inadequate or poorly qualified assisting staff	9%	7%	15%	13%

Notes: * indicates statistically significant difference from England at the five percent level. Data pooled between PISA 2015 and 2018.

Figure 5.6 makes an explicit comparison of perceptions of resource shortages across schools with a large ("low SES") and small ("high SES") share of disadvantaged pupils. In terms of educational materials and physical infrastructure, socio-economic differences across schools tends to be relatively small and not statistically significant across any of the four nations. In contrast, there are more notable differences with respect to staffing (mainly teaching) resources. Most notably, in England, Wales and Scotland,

headteachers leading schools with a large share of disadvantaged pupils are around 20 percentage points more likely to report a lack of teaching staff as an issue hindering instruction (compared to leaders with more socio-economically advantaged pupils). There is a similar socio-economic gap in England and Wales with respect to the available teaching staff being inadequate or poorly qualified. In contrast, in England there is no difference between schools serving mainly advantaged and disadvantaged pupils in terms of access to and quality of teaching assistants. The same is not true, however, in Scotland and Wales, where leaders of schools with a large proportion of disadvantaged pupils are more likely to flag a lack of teaching assistants as an important issue. Interestingly, in Northern Ireland, the situation is reversed, with leaders of schools with a more advantaged socio-economic intake perceiving a lack of assistance staff to be a problem affecting the quality of instruction.

Figure 5.6. Headteacher perceptions of resourcing issues impacting instruction. A comparison of schools with a large and small share of disadvantaged pupils.

	England		NI		Wales		Scotland	
	Low SES	High SES	Low SES	High SES	Low SES	High SES	Low SES	High SES
Physical material								
A lack of educational material	27%	17%	34%	34%	45%	41%	10%	26%
Inadequate or poor quality educational material	24%	20%	31%	32%	35%	34%	10%	27%
A lack of physical infrastructure	35%	35%	46%	47%	55%	52%	13%	21%
Inadequate or poor quality physical infrastructure	32%	38%	47%	44%	60%	55%	24%	17%
Staffing issues								
A lack of teaching staff	44%	21%*	31%	31%	34%	12%*	45%	26%
Inadequate or poorly qualified teaching staff	22%	8%*	10%	0%	17%	2%*	7%	3%
A lack of assisting staff	16%	16%	19%	45%*	38%	21%*	47%	15%*
Inadequate or poorly qualified assisting staff	8%	5%	11%	5%	18%	12%	17%	9%

Note: The average of the PISA ESCS index is first calculated by school for each survey wave. Disadvantaged schools are then defined as those in the bottom quartile of the school-average ESCS index in each wave. Data pooled between 2006 and 2018. * indicates statistically significant difference between high and low SES schools at the five percent level.

Summary

There are clear differences in the level and recent trends in spending per pupil across the four nations. Spending per pupil is highest in Scotland and lowest in Northern Ireland. Recent cuts to spending per pupil have been largest in Northern Ireland, followed by England and Wales. Cuts to spending per pupil in Scotland have been more than reversed by recent increases to pay for higher levels of teacher pay in 2018 and 2019.

This partly translates into differences in staffing levels and perceived problems with resources, with lower pupil:teacher ratios in Scotland. Pupil:teacher ratios are higher and have been rising over time in both Northern Ireland and Wales. In England, primary school pupil:teacher ratios have been more stable in recent years, though secondary school pupil:teacher ratios have risen significantly.

A large share of headteachers report problems with educational materials and infrastructure across all four nations. Headteachers in Wales are mostly likely to perceive there to be problems with educational materials, whilst leaders in Scotland are most positive about the quality of infrastructure. England and Scotland report most difficulties in terms of attracting sufficient numbers of teachers, though this will have come before recent increases in teacher pay (in Scotland in particular) and the pandemic.

In terms of the structure of the system, schools are responsible for a larger share of funding in England (90 per cent) than in Wales (84 per cent) and a much larger share than in Scotland (66 per cent) and Northern Ireland (60 per cent), where local authorities and the Education Authority play a very large role.

Explicit funding for disadvantaged pupils seems to be greatest in England, with the Pupil Premium covering more pupils than equivalent schemes in Wales and Scotland, and a high share of core funding allocated based on disadvantage in England. The systems are more complicated in Scotland and Wales and have been recently criticised for not providing enough funding for disadvantaged pupils. There is no equivalent to the Pupil Premium in Northern Ireland, with all disadvantaged funding passing through the main common funding formula.

Looking at perceptions of resources, headteachers leading schools with highly disadvantaged intakes in Wales are highly likely to report problems with education materials and physical resources. Headteachers leading schools with disadvantaged intakes are more likely to report problems attracting teachers in all four nations, particularly in England and Scotland.

6. Curriculum

As with many areas of education policy, the Scottish curriculum has differed from the rest of the UK for a long period of time. However, the curriculums in place right across the UK have increasingly diverged over time, both in terms of content and approach, since devolution.

The main divergence has been between the approach taken in England as compared with the rest of the UK. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, policymakers have sought to create areas of learning and general aims or mission statements, emphasising the links between different subjects. Subject to these general goals and the content of exams, they have left schools and teachers to determine much of the specific contents of the curriculum. In contrast, England has adopted an approach that emphasises traditional subjects, with specific detail about the minimum content expected to be taught at each stage and in each subject.

Northern Ireland Curriculum

Since 1994, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has set and managed the development of the curriculum in Northern Ireland.[57] Over the early 2000s, a major review of the Northern Ireland curriculum took place. A new curriculum was approved in 2004 and phased in from 2007.[58] The overall objectives of the Northern Ireland curriculum are to provide young people the

[57] Northern Ireland Assembly (2012) Research and Information Service Briefing Paper: Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [Online] Available at: http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2012/education/11512.pdf
[58] Ibid.

opportunity to develop as an individual, a contributor to society, and as a contributor to the economy and the environment. It emphasises links between different subjects through areas of learning:[59]

- Language and Literacy
- Mathematics and Numeracy
- Modern Languages
- The Arts
- Environment and Society
- Science and Technology
- Learning for Life and Work
- Physical Education
- Religious Education

The Curriculum also sets out examples of learning experiences that are expected to be covered in each area of learning at different stages of education. However, teachers and schools have flexibility to set the content that is appropriate to their learners' interests and abilities.

Curriculum for Excellence – Scotland

Prior to devolution, the National 5-14 Curriculum provided set guidance on on what children should be taught at different stages of school. The process for changing this curriculum then began very soon after devolution. In 2002, the Scottish Executive launched a major consultation exercise called the 'National Debate on Education' on the state of school education. This concluded that the old curriculum was too dominated by academic subjects, too exam-focussed and not flexible enough to respond to the changes taking place in society.

A new 'Curriculum for Excellence' was implemented across the majority of Scottish schools from 2010. Like the Northern Ireland Curriculum, the Curriculum for Excellence sets out a number of general aims and divides learning into eight over-lapping curriculum areas. The overall aim of the new curriculum is to help "children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century."[60] It also set out four key capacities aimed at helping young people become: successful learners; confident individuals; responsible citizens; and effective contributors. Learning is then divided up into eight curriculum areas:

- Expressive arts
- Health and wellbeing
- Languages (including English, Gaidhlig, Gaelic learners and modern languages)
- Mathematics
- Religious and moral education
- Sciences
- Social studies
- Technologies

[59] https://ccea.org.uk/about/what-we-do/curriculum/curriculum-areas-learning
[60] https://www.education.gov.scot/education-scotland/scottish-education-system/policy-for-scottish-education/policy-drivers/cfe-building-from-the-statement-appendix-incl-btc1-5/what-is-curriculum-for-excellence

Literacy, numeracy and health are not mentioned separately and are deemed to be the 'responsibility of all' staff. The Curriculum then sets out a series of experiences and outcomes for leaners that are expected to be covered at different phases of education.[61]

It does not set out specific content, however. Individual schools and teachers are expected to design the curriculum around the needs of their learners and local community. Considerable autonomy is therefore granted to individual schools in the design of the curriculum. Further freedoms were granted to headteachers in 2017.[62]

The overall structure of Curriculum for Excellence therefore bears a large degree of similarity with the new curriculum in Northern Ireland, with both emphasizing cross-cutting areas of learning, broad statements of expected learning experiences and outcomes, and allowing schools and teachers to set specific content.

Curriculum for Wales

Up until recently, there have been no major changes to the National Curriculum in Wales since its introduction in the early 1990s. However, a new Curriculum for Wales is due to be introduced from 2022 and will follow a broadly similar structure to the new curriculums in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Following a major review of the curriculum by Professor Donaldson in 2015[63], who also advised the Scottish Government on the Curriculum for Excellence, the Welsh Government published the final version of the Curriculum for Wales in early 2020. Like the new curriculums in Scotland and Northern Ireland, it sets out four general aims and core purposes of the curriculum. These are to support young people to be: ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; healthy, confident individuals.

Individual schools are then expected to design their curriculum into six different areas of learning:

- Expressive arts
- Health and well-being
- Humanities
- Languages, literacy and communication
- Mathematics and numeracy
- Science and technology

These are intended to encourage more cross-cutting learning within and across areas of learning, but not necessarily to replace individual subjects and disciplines. Literacy, numeracy and digital competence will be mandatory cross-curricular skills in all the curriculums adopted by individual schools. The Curriculum for Wales also sets out 27 "What Matters" statements setting out what must be covered by all schools.

This new Curriculum for Wales is due to be introduced from 2022. It will begin by covering all pupils up to year 7 and be progressively extended to older year groups as these pupils move through the system, covering year 11 in 2026.

[61] https://www.education.gov.scot/education-scotland/scottish-education-system/policy-for-scottish-education/policy-drivers/cfe-building-from-the-statement-appendix-incl-btc1-5/experiences-and-outcomes/
[62] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-40275330
[63] https://gov.wales/successful-futures-review-curriculum-and-assessment-arrangements

National Curriculum in England

The Department for Education introduced a new national curriculum in England from 2014 onwards. This followed a review of the national curriculum led by Tim Oates.[64] The new national curriculum sets out the core knowledge pupils are expected to learn in different subjects up to age 16. It was designed to emulate high-performing school systems across the world.

In contrast to the other three UK nations, it is organised around more traditional subjects and disciplines, such as English, maths, history, geography, science and physical education. It is also more specific in terms of the knowledge and skills pupils are expected to learn in each subject and stage of education. However, it draws a distinction between the school and national curriculums, with individual schools expected to go beyond the core set of information defined in programmes of study for each subject and level. Furthermore, Academies and Free Schools are able to deviate from the national curriculum if they so wish.

In comparison with Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the new National Curriculum in England therefore specifies much more in terms of minimum content to be covered by schools. However, all four countries have emphasised and expanded the role of schools in determining the content of the curriculum they teach.

Comparing responsibility for the Curriculum

Data from PISA can also provide some insight into the *perceptions* of headteachers about who has control over the curriculum in practice. Figure 6.1 presents evidence on this matter with respect to course offerings, whilst Figure 6.2 looks at course content. These figures are pooled across all available years to maximize sample size. However, there is little evidence that these patterns have changed over time (see Appendix A) with the exception of the following:

- An apparent decline in the perceived role of headteachers in deciding courses offered in schools in England, Scotland and Wales (though, as Figure 6.1 suggests, this has remained high in absolute terms).
- A small decline in Scotland in the perceived role of local/regional government in deciding course offerings.
- A decline in Scotland in the influence of national government over course content (driven by a particularly large change between 2006 and 2009).

Otherwise, there is little clear evidence of substantial, sustained change over time.

Under the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland, schools and teachers are expected to play a substantial role in shaping the nature and content of the curriculum. Despite this, Scotland stands out in these figures with teachers perceived to play a lower role in shaping course offerings and course content than in the rest of the UK. Whilst headteachers report a slightly larger perceived role in shaping course offerings than in other nations, it is clear that local and national government is perceived to still play a much larger role in shaping course offerings and content in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. Over 50 per cent of

64 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175439/NCR-Expert_Panel_Report.pdf

headteachers in Scotland report that national government plays a considerable role in shaping course content, which is substantially more than seen in the rest of the UK.

Across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, similarly large shares of teachers and headteachers report considerable responsibility for both course offerings and course content. Differences do emerge, however, in the role of governing boards and local/national government. Governing boards are perceived to play a larger role in shaping course offerings in both Wales (47 per cent) and Northern Ireland (41 per cent) than in England (31 per cent). Local and national government are perceived to play a larger role in shaping both course offerings and content in Wales and Northern Ireland than in England. Indeed, the perceived role of local and national government in both shaping course offerings and content is lowest in England. This is despite the National Curriculum in England containing much more specific expectations, both before and after the recent reforms. Again, it is important to state whilst the figures over time have smaller sample sizes, there is little evidence that these patterns have shifted over time.

Figure 6.1. A comparison of who has responsibility for course offerings across the UK

Who has considerable responsibility for deciding which courses are offered	England	NI	Wales	Scotland
Headteacher	87%	91%*	91%*	94%*
Teachers	86%	83%	81%*	72%*
Governing board	31%	41%*	47%*	5%*
Regional/local education authority	1%	3%	12%*	32%*
National government	8%	13%*	15%*	19%*

Notes: * indicates statistically significant difference from England at the five percent level. Data pooled between PISA 2006 and 2015.

Table 6.2. A comparison of who has responsibility for course content across the UK

Who has considerable responsibility for determining course content	England	NI	Wales	Scotland
Headteacher	22%	23%	22%	22%
Teachers	95%	94%	95%	91%
Governing board	3%	3%	7%*	1%*
Regional/local education authority	0%	4%*	4%*	16%*
National government	17%	28%*	24%*	54%*

Notes: * indicates statistically significant difference from England at the five percent level. Data pooled between PISA 2006 and 2015, except for headteacher and teachers which pools data between 2009 and 2015. This is due to headteachers and teachers being combined into a single category in PISA 2006.

Summary

There is a very clear divide in curriculum approaches between the four nations of the UK. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have each adopted a curriculum that emphasises cross-cutting areas of learning and leaves significant autonomy to schools and teachers to shape the precise content. In contrast, England has maintained traditional subjects and specific guidance on the minimum amount of material expected to be covered at each stage, though schools are clearly still free to go beyond this.

Somewhat surprisingly, these differences in approach do not seem to translate into headteacher perceptions of who actually has considerable responsibility. Despite the large role given to schools and headteachers under the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland, the perceived role of teachers in shaping

course offerings and content is lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK, and the role of national and local government is perceived to be much higher. The role of teachers is generally perceived to be greater in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Despite the very specific curriculum structure, it is England where the role of national and local government is perceived to be lowest. These differences seem to coincide with the larger role for national and local government in school governance in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

7. Exams and assessments

Since devolution, there has been increasing divergence on external tests and assessments across the UK. This occurred in two distinct phases. Up to around 2010, there were reductions in the amount of formal external tests across each country of the UK, and less use of such assessments in league tables. In contrast, since 2010, there has been a resurgence in formal testing again, though often for different purposes, with the focus now on checking pupil progress and informing school decisions rather than as part of school accountability mechanisms.

There have also been significant reforms to end of school assessments, particularly in recent years. Scotland has run a separate set of examinations for a long period of time, though these have been subject to significant changes. England, Wales and Northern Ireland have historically maintained a common set of GCSE and A level examinations. However, even these have started to diverge in recent years. The current set of exams and assessments in place across the UK are summarised in Figure 7.1 below and discussed in more details in what follows.

Figure 7.1: Summary of current exams and assessments across the UK

England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Reception Baseline (delayed to 2021) Y1 Phonics Check (2012) Y2 KS1 Test (internal) Y6 KS2 Tests (English & Maths) GCSE exams from 2017 (9-1 grades & linear) A Levels (linear from 2015)	National Literacy and Numeracy Tests in Y2-Y9 (from 2013, computer tests from 2019) Welsh GCSEs from 2017 (A*-G, linear or modular, coursework) AS/A Levels	SNSAs (from 2017, literacy & numeracy, P1, P4, P7 & S3, computer tests) National 1-5s (from 2014) Highers Advanced Highers (from 2000)	Levels of Progression in Y4, Y7 & Y10 from 2012 (teacher-assessed) NI GCSEs from 2017 (A*-G with C*, linear or modular, coursework) AS/A Levels

Reductions in external testing: 1999 to 2010

Prior to devolution in 1999, all pupils in state-funded schools in England and Wales took written tests in maths and English (as well as science at ages 11 and 14). Similar tests at age 5-14 existed in Scotland too.

The Scottish Executive and Welsh Assembly Government (as they were then known) chose to abolish these written tests and associated league tables during the early 2000s. In Wales, tests for seven-year olds were

abolished in 2002, followed by the abolition of tests for older pupils from 2004. This was justified on the basis that such tests were placing undue pressure on teachers and pupils and followed recommendations from the 2004 Daugherty review of statutory assessment.[65] Tests and associated league tables were also abolished by the Scottish Executive in 2004. On abolition, the then Scottish education minister said that "*the annual survey of 5-14 attainment... has driven some schools and teachers to test, test and retest*."[66]

England chose to maintain Key Stage tests, though the number and nature of the tests has changed over time. Pupils aged 7 still sit Key Stage 1 tests, but since 2004 these have been marked internally and only used to inform teacher judgements. Key Stage 2 tests at age 11 remain a key part of the system for all schools in English and mathematics. From 2009, Key Stage 2 tests in science were conducted in only a sample of primary schools.[67] Following problems with the marking process in 2008, Key Stage 3 tests were scrapped altogether from 2009[68]. These were replaced by teacher assessments.

In Northern Ireland, teacher assessments were predominantly used in place of externally written tests throughout the 2000s. The main externally marked written tests in the 2000s were the 11+ tests used for selection into grammar schools. Official 11+ tests no longer operated from 2010. In their place, two unofficial transfers tests known as the GL and AQE tests are now widely used for entry into grammar schools, with the GL test mainly used by Catholic grammar schools and the AQE mainly used by other grammar schools.[69]

Resurgence in external testing: 2010 onwards

Over the last decade, there has a been a resurgence of national testing and assessments, particularly in Scotland and Wales.

In England, a phonic screening check for pupils in year 1 was introduced in 2012.[70] This provides parents, teachers and schools with an assessment as to whether children have reached the expected standards in word reading skills. School-level results are provided to local authorities and Ofsted. National results are also published to track progress and inform policy priorities. However, the test results are not published in the form of league tables. A reception baseline assessment for all pupils starting school in England was due to be introduced in 2020. However, this has been delayed to 2021 due to the pandemic.[71] This is intended to provide a baseline by which to judge a cohort's progress in school and allow for the removal of Key Stage 1 tests.[72] It is not expected to be used as a diagnostic tool or to inform teacher decisions.

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[65] Daugherty, R., Learning Pathways through statutory assessment: Key Stages 2 and 3, Daugherty Assessment Review Group Final Report, (2004).
[66] https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/sep/26/scotland.schools
[67] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-key-stage-2-testing-assessment-and-accountability-final-report; https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/key-stage-2-science-sampling-tests
[68] Collins, S., Reiss, M. and Stobart, G. (2010) *What happens when high-stakes testing stops? Teachers' perceptions of the impact of compulsory national testing in science of 11-year-olds in England and its abolition in Wales*, Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice, 17:3, 273-86,
[69] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-44598805
[70] https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/14012/1/assessment%20framework%20for%20the%20development%20of%20the%20year%201%20phonics%20screening%20check.pdf
[71] https://schoolsweek.co.uk/reception-baseline-assessment-introduction-delayed-to-2021/
[72] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reception-baseline-assessment-framework; https://schoolsweek.co.uk/reception-baseline-assessment-introduction-delayed-to-2021/

In 2013, Wales introduced national literacy and numeracy tests for all pupils aged 7-14 (years 2-9). The main purpose of these tests is to give teachers and schools a clear idea of individual pupils' needs and abilities in literacy and numeracy. Results are standardized to a score of 100 for each age group each year, so the tests cannot be used to track national progress over time. However, they have been used to compare *relative* performance, such as the gender gap, differences by area and differences within each cohort of pupils. From 2019, these written tests are being gradually replaced by online, personalized (adaptive) assessments. This is for the same year groups (years 2-9) and can be taken at any point during the school year. The content of these tests differs for pupils of differing abilities, depending upon how they perform in earlier test questions.

In 2017, the Scottish Government introduced Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSAs) in literacy and numeracy. These are 45-minute online, adaptive assessments and are taken by pupils in year groups P1 (ages 5-6), P4 (ages 8-9), P7 (ages 11-12) and S3 (ages 14-15). They can be taken at any point during the school year. The detailed pupil results are provided to teachers and schools, which help them assess pupils' progress and abilities in literacy and numeracy. They are then used by teachers to inform wider assessments of literacy and numeracy, which are provided to parents, local authorities and the Scottish Government. Schools and local authorities use the school and area-level assessments to plan their school improvement priorities. The Scottish Government publishes the wider assessments and uses them to identify trends and policy priorities.

In Northern Ireland, a focus on teacher assessment has remained. Since 2012-13, pupils in years 4, 7 and 10 have been assessed by teachers using "Levels of Progression," which represent a series of can-do statements in literacy, numeracy and ICT (from 2012).[73] These are intended to help teachers and schools assess the progress of individual pupils, and to allow the government to monitor the system as a whole. They are not used as part of school league tables. Computer-based assessments for pupils in years 4-7 in literacy and numeracy, similar to those in place in Scotland and Wales, were introduced in 2012-13. Due to significant implementation problems, these tests were made optional from 2017-18.[74]

How does the use of test and assessment data by schools vary across the UK?

In this section, we build upon these comparisons by illustrating how responsibility and use of testing varies across the UK. This is based on the PISA survey of headteachers and will reflect both internal and external assessments. It will also reflect how perceptions vary.

Figure 7.2 shows perceptions of who has responsibility for establishing pupil assessment policies across the UK (incorporating internal school assessments and external national assessments). Broadly speaking, headteachers perceive themselves as having the largest role, with about 90 per cent or more perceiving themselves as having a considerable role right across the UK. Individual teachers are also perceived to have similar and large roles across the UK, with about 75-80 per cent of headteachers perceiving individual teachers to have a considerable responsibility. As teachers do not shape external tests, this will reflect the importance placed on internal assessments by headteachers and individual teachers.

[73] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/assessment
[74] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/non-renewal-cba-contract

In other respects, Scotland stands out from the rest of the UK. Regional and national government are perceived to have a much more prominent role in establishing assessment policies in Scotland than in Wales, Northern Ireland and England. The other main point of contrast is the input of governing boards, which are perceived to have much less responsibility in Scotland (6 per cent) than the rest of the UK, reflecting their less prominent role in general. The role of governing bodies is also perceived to be smaller in England (34 per cent) than in Northern Ireland (43 percent) and Wales (56 percent).

Figure 7.2: Responsibility for establishing pupil assessment policies across the UK

Who has considerable responsibility for establishing student assessment policies	England	NI	Wales	Scotland
Headteacher	94%	94%	96%	89%*
Teachers	73%	78%	78%	75%
Governing board	34%	43%*	56%*	6%*
Regional/local education authority	3%	5%	7%*	40%*
National government	7%	10%	7%	31%*

Notes: * indicates statistically significant difference from England at the five percent level. Data pooled between PISA 2006 and 2015.

As shown in Figure 7.3, there are four ways that almost all schools use assessment data across the whole of the UK: (a) to inform parents about children's progress; (b) to make comparisons to regional/national performance; (c) to monitor trends in scores over time and (d) to identify aspects of instruction that could be improved. On the whole, the vast majority of schools across the four countries also use test and assessment data to draw comparisons to other schools, with only small differences across the UK.

There are also some clear points of difference. For instance, schools in England (63 per cent) are less likely to use assessment data to make decisions about pupils' retention or promotion between different achievement groups than schools in Wales (75 per cent), Scotland (78 per cent) and Northern Ireland (80 per cent). On the other hand, schools in Northern Ireland (78 per cent) are less likely to use test score data to group pupils for instructional purposes than schools elsewhere in the UK, perhaps reflecting the greater selection into different types of schools in the first place. Importantly, schools in England (89 per cent) and Wales (81 per cent) are much more likely to use assessment data to draw inferences about the effectiveness of teachers than schools in Northern Ireland (69 per cent) and Scotland (63 per cent). This more generally reflects the greater role that individual schools play in managing staff in England and Wales.

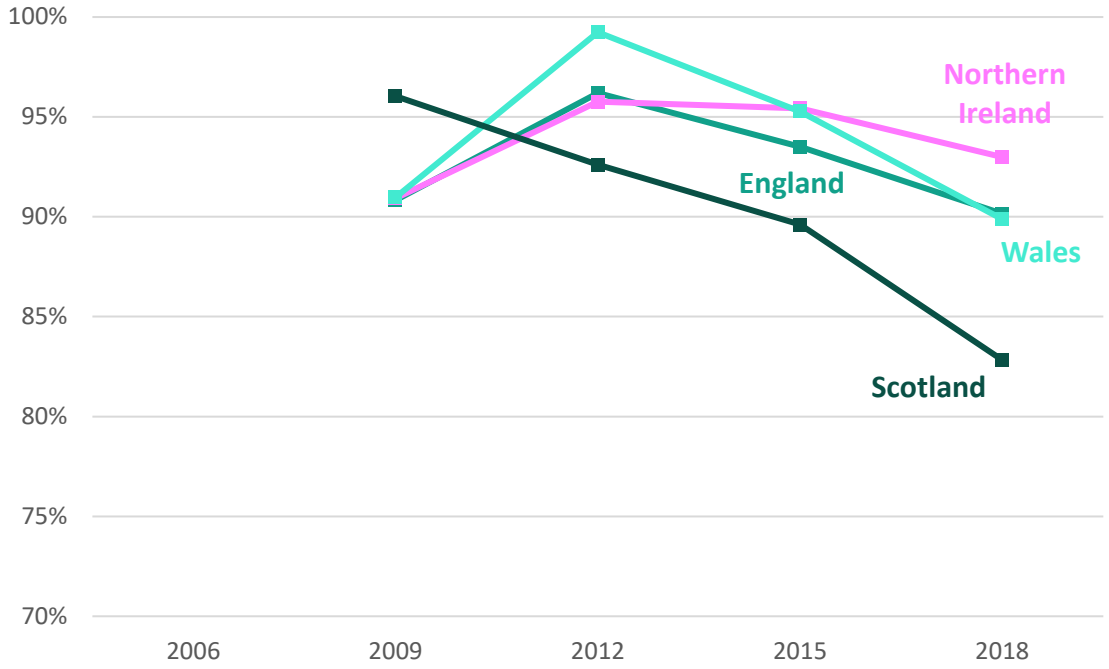
Figure 7.3: How tests and assessments are used by schools across the UK

Are assessments of students used to…..	England	NI	Wales	Scotland
Inform parents about their child's progress	99%	100%	100%	100%
Make decisions about student retention/promotion	63%	80%*	75%*	78%*
Group students for instructional purposes	96%	78%*	95%	88%*
Compare school to regional or national performance	93%	94%	94%	91%
Monitor the school's progress from year to year	98%	99%	98%	98%
Make judgements about teachers' effectiveness	89%	69%*	81%*	63%*
Identify aspects of instruction or curriculum that could be improved	95%	94%	94%	95%
Compare the school with other schools	85%	90%*	90%*	86%

Notes: * indicates statistically significant difference from England at the five percent level. Data pooled between PISA 2009 and 2018.

There have also been some changes over time in how schools use data from assessments. For instance, Figure 7.4 uses data from PISA to illustrate the use of assessments by schools to draw regional or national comparisons. Most notably, there has been a decline in Scotland between 2009 and 2018 in the use of assessment data for this purpose, though the absolute level remains high (83 per cent). The trend for the other UK countries is not clear, with figures from 2018 similar to 2009, and generally high across the board.

Figure 7.4. A comparison over time of assessment use by schools to compare the school to regional or national performance



Source: PISA headteacher questionnaire. Note that the axis starts at 70% in order to highlight recent trends

Divergence on end of school examinations

In the early 2000s, England, Wales and Northern Ireland maintained a common set of academic qualifications at ages 16 and 18. Pupils sat GCSE or equivalent qualifications at age 16. Pupils who stayed in education could then take AS levels at age 17 and full A levels at age 18. There was also the option of taking vocational qualifications or apprenticeships after the age of 16. Since then, qualifications have begun to diverge.

Starting with GCSEs, one big change during the 2000s was the inclusion of equivalent qualifications in headline measures of performance in the mid-2000s in both England and Wales. The 2011 Wolf Review of Vocational Education concluded that a rapid uptake of vocational qualifications in England could account for a large part of the rise in headline performance over time. Concerns were also raised about the effects of early and repeated entries in both England and Wales. In response, GCSE performance measures were substantially reformed in England from 2013-14 to restrict the contribution vocational qualifications could make and to only count pupils' first attempt at GCSEs.

England then introduced new GCSE specifications which began to be phased in from 2016-17. These new GCSEs moved to a 9-1 grading structure, in place of the old A*-G system. All new GCSEs are linear, with all exams at the end of the course, while any student resitting must take all exams again. Importantly, this meant that non-examination forms of assessment (i.e. "coursework") no longer contribute towards pupils' final grades in the vast majority of cases. This major reform of GCSEs was justified as a means to increase the rigour and public confidence in GCSEs. The move away from coursework and modular GCSEs was justified as a means to increase consistency, reduce the number of exams and assessments during courses and to ensure a holistic assessment of all knowledge at the end of the course.[75]

Following a major review of qualifications in 2012, Wales also introduced limits on the contribution that vocational qualifications could make, as well as limits on resits. From 2016-17, Wales also introduced a separate set of Welsh GCSEs, regulated by Qualification Wales.[76] In contrast to the new 9-1 grading system in England, these new Welsh GCSEs retained the A*-G grading structure and allowed for both modular and linear GCSEs. The content and subject material also differs from new GCSEs in England. Coursework was also retained. These reforms were justified on the need to ensure qualifications met the needs of learners and the economy in Wales, with continued use of coursework, internal assessments and modularity justified on the basis of a need to allow flexibility.[77]

Before this, the Welsh Government had also introduced the 'Welsh Baccalaureate' in 2007. This can be taken by 14-16 year olds and at post-16 level. To be awarded, pupils must meet certain GCSE and A level exam requirements (e.g. GCSEs at A*-C in English or Welsh and maths, 3 further GCSEs and 2 A levels). Pupils must then also achieve a Skills Challenge Certificate involving an individual project and challenges in three other areas: enterprise and employability skills; knowledge of global issues; and, participating in community-based activities. It is intended to provide a broader set of skills and experiences. Following criticism about the benefits of the Welsh Bac, the review of qualifications in 2012 recommended a more rigorous version be introduced from 2015 onwards.[78] However, there remain concerns about its complexity, the extent to which it displaces other GCSE or A-level qualifications and the extent to which it is recognised by universities across the UK.[79]

Northern Ireland announced new GCSE specifications for summer 2017.[80] These new GCSEs in Northern Ireland maintained the A*-G grading structure, but the A* is intended to align with a grade 9 in England and a new C* was also introduced to align with a grade 5 in England. Pupils in Northern Ireland canalso take GCSEs awarded on a 9-1 basis. This is to ensure flexibility.[81] Like Wales, new GCSEs in Northern Ireland can be linear or modular, and the content and subject matter differs from England and Wales.

[75] https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20141110161452/http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/gcse-reform-june-2013/
[76] https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/qualifications/gcses-and-a-levels/gcses/
[77] https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/review-of-qualifications-for-14-to-19-year-olds-in-wales-final-report-and-recommendations_0.pdf
[78] https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/review-of-qualifications-for-14-to-19-year-olds-in-wales-final-report-and-recommendations_0.pdf
[79] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-43864885
[80] https://ccea.org.uk/regulation/qualifications-regulation/guide-changes-gcse-grading
[81] https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/oral-statement-gcse-qualification-market-and-grading-28-june-2016

In the mid 2000s, A levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland took very similar forms. Pupils generally sat AS level exams at age 17, which counted for about one half of their overall A level grade or could represent a qualification on their own. A2 exams were sat at age 18, which counted for the second half of an overall A level grade. These exams were also modular, allowing pupils to retake individual modules.

England then made large changes to A-level qualifications taught from 2015.[82] These returned to a linear, rather than modular, structure with all exams at the end of the course (again, with most non-examination forms of assessment dropped). AS levels also no longer count towards A level grades in England, though can represent a qualification on their own.

In contrast, Wales and Northern Ireland have retained the modular structure, allowing students to take AS exams half-way through the course, which count for about 40 per cent of their overall A level grade. Content requirements of the new A level qualifications are, however, broadly similar across countries.[83]

Scotland has maintained a different set of qualifications to the rest of the UK for a long period of time. Until recently, pupils aged 15 and 16 took Standard Grades, as well as Intermediate and Access qualifications.[84] For those taking Standard Grades, learners took about seven subjects, including maths and English.[85] From 2014, these were all replaced by National 1-5 qualifications, with most pupils taking National 4 and National 5 qualifications. The higher level National 4 and 5 courses are taken over one year. National 4s are assessed by teachers through coursework. National 5s are assessed through a combination of coursework and end of course external examinations. Just over 55 per cent of candidates taking National 5 exams in 2019 were in S4. However, about 27 per cent were in S5 and 12 per cent in S6. This illustrates the greater fluidity and flexibility in the Scottish exams and assessments system. Pupils are able to take a range of different course at different levels at any point in the Senior Phase (S4-S6) and then move on to the next level. This allows pupils to take lower qualifications in S4 (such as National 4 exams) and then move on to higher qualifications in S5 and S6.

The Scottish equivalent of A level exams are Highers, which have existed in one form or another for over 100 years.[86] They usually last one year and have been the traditional means of entry into 4-year higher education courses in Scotland (though some schools have now introduced 2-year Highers whereby the learners do not sit the National 5 exam but work towards the Higher course content over 2 years). On average, learners take about 3 Higher courses each year.[87] As with Nationals, these can be taken in different year groups. In 2019, just over 50 per cent of entries were in S5, about 40 per cent in S6 and 7 per cent in further education.

Under the "Higher Still" reforms of 2000, Advanced Highers replaces the Certificate of Sixth Year Studies. These are one-year courses and theoretically allow for direct entry into the second year of 4-year university

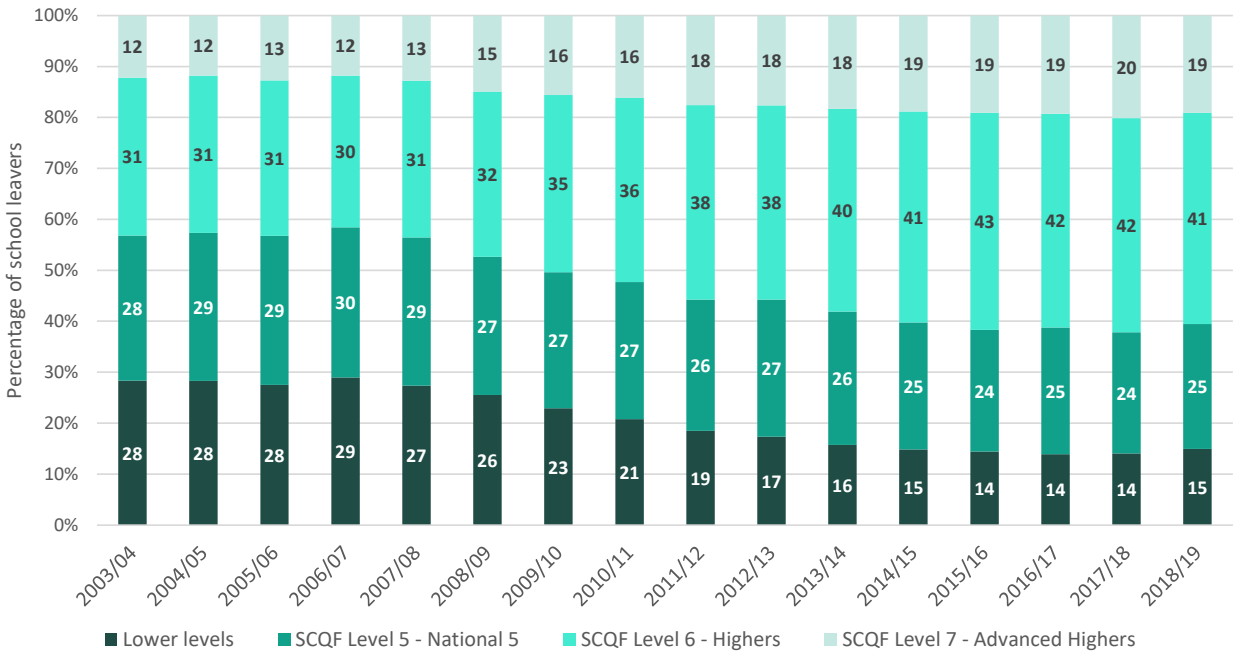
[82] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/as-and-a-level-changes-a-summary/summary-of-changes-to-as-and-a-levels-from-2015
[83] https://www.qualificationswales.org/media/4950/statement-from-the-qualification-regulators-eng.pdf
[84] https://scqf.org.uk/media/zd0f4ka3/old-v-new.pdf
[85] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-23585178
[86] https://scqf.org.uk/media/zd0f4ka3/old-v-new.pdf
[87] https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/91419.html

courses, with learners taking 1-3 Advanced Highers. They are also used to aid entry into 3-year university courses elsewhere in the UK. As one would expect, over 95 per cent of entries come from students in S6.

Figure 7.5 shows the share of school leavers in Scotland with different qualification levels over time (this is not extended to 2020 given the very different way in which qualifications were awarded during the pandemic in 2020). As can be seen, the share of Scottish school leavers with qualifications below National 5 level (i.e. below Scottish Curriculum and Qualification Framework Level 5) has declined over time, from about 28 per cent in the early 2000s to about 15 per cent by 2019. The share leaving with National 5 equivalent qualifications has also fallen over time, from about 28-29 per cent in the early 2000s to 25 per cent in 2019. There has been a rise in the share of school leavers with Higher level qualifications, from around 31 per cent in the early 2000s to 41 per cent in 2019. There has also been a rise in the share of leavers with Advanced Highers, rising from 12 per cent in the early 2000s to 19 per cent in 2019, though it clearly remains a minority of Scottish students who take Advanced Highers. Most of these changes took place in the period up to 2013-14, with little change in these figures since National 1-5 qualifications were brought in and which would have affected school leavers from about 2014 to 2015.

There has therefore been a rising share of Scottish school leavers with higher level qualifications over time, with progress stalling slightly in the last 5 years. Alongside this, there has been a rise in the number of Highers taken by school leavers over time, with around 21 per cent of school leavers passing 6 or more Highers in 2019 compared with 13 per cent in 2009 (and 11 per cent with 7 or more passes in 2019 compared with 5 per cent in 2009). The number of passes at Level 5 has also risen time, with 41 per cent of school leavers passing 7 or more Level 5 qualifications in 2019 compared with 36 per cent in 2009.

Figure 7.5. Percentage of school leavers in Scotland with different qualification levels over time



Source: Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations, No. 3: 2021 Edition (https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-attainment-initial-leaver-destinations-no-3-2021-edition/); https://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20150529123733/http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/PubAttainment.

Summary

The four nations of the UK have carved out their own approaches to assessments and examinations over the last 20 years. External tests at age 7, 11 and 14 were abolished in Scotland and Wales in the early 2000s 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 over the last decade, with Wales and Scotland both re-introducing external tests in some form to assess pupil progress, inform teacher judgements and assess national benchmarks. In England, a phonics check in Year 1 was introduced and a reception baseline assessment is due to be introduced in 2021. There has been less change in Northern Ireland, with a sustained focus on teacher assessment.

There are also differences in how testing and assessments are set and used. There is a much larger role for regional and national government in setting student assessment policies in Scotland as compared with the other three nations. There are also differences in how assessments are used, partly reflecting differences in the overall system. For instance, in Northern Ireland, tests are more likely to be used for student promotion/retention decisions and less likely to be used for streaming by ability within school (which makes sense given there is already academic selection by school). Schools in Scotland and Northern Ireland are also less likely to use student test score data to make judgements about teachers.

In terms of qualifications, England, Wales and Northern Ireland have increasingly diverged on GCSEs and A levels. England has changed the grading system for GCSEs and focused on linear end of course assessments. Wales and Northern Ireland have maintained the A*-G grading system for GCSEs, AS levels and a modular system of assessment for both GCSEs and A levels. As in the early 2000s, Scotland has continued to maintain a different set of end of school academic qualifications, though recent years have seen the introduction of National 1-5 qualifications and more students taking more Highers.

The increasing divergence on qualifications shows that education policymakers have increasingly used their devolved powers in this area to reflect national policy priorities. However, this also presents risks, with many young people moving to a different country for university and work. If universities and employers find it hard to navigate and understand an increasingly complicated system, then there is a clear risk that certain young people could be disadvantaged.

8. Accountability

The ending of school performance tables in Scotland and Wales was one of the most visible early effects of devolution in the early 2000s. However, since then, there have been a range of further changes to systems of school accountability and evaluation across all four nations, including the introduction of a school banding system in Wales, differing roles for school inspections and a growing role for regional and executive agencies.

League Tables

During the 1990s, official school performance tables, or league tables as they are more popularly known, were published in all four nations. The rationale was to give more information to parents on the quality or performance of individual schools, encourage greater competition between schools, both through competition for pupil numbers and in terms of providing a yardstick or more general comparisons.

After devolution, these league tables were quickly abolished in Wales and Northern Ireland in 2001 and in Scotland in 2003.[88] Their abolition was often justified on the basis that they were crude, created perverse incentives to teach to the test and placed an unnecessary burden on schools.[89] Schools were instead encouraged to publish their exam results in reports to parents, allowing for national comparisons. Whilst there remain no official league tables, many newspapers and comparison websites have continued to publish unofficial and partial school comparisons.

Research has argued that the removal of league tables in Wales in the early 2000s reduced GCSE performance as compared with England by just under 0.1 standard deviations.[90] Whilst this is a relatively large effect, some of likely to reflect a greater incentive to make use of GCSE equivalents in England to boost league table position, rather than differences in underlying performance, skills or knowledge.

Whatever the true effect, the Welsh Government has made some steps back towards making more school-to-school comparisons by introducing a system of school banding in 2011. At present, schools in Wales are grouped into four categories (Green, Yellow, Amber and Red) based on a range of indicators, including data on attendance and examination results as well as judgements about the quality of leadership, teaching and likely support needed to improve. The regional consortia play a key role in the categorisation process and provide more support to schools in lower categories, e.g. the red group get up to 25 days of support.[91] This categorisation system is currently suspended for the 2020-21 academic year due to the pandemic and its long-run future is currently unknown.

In England, performance tables have remained a key element of the school accountability system. However, the measures included in these tables have changed and expanded over time. Over time there has been a shift towards greater focus on "value-added" performance metrics, which account for prior attainment or skills on entry to school. In the late 2000s, there was also use of "contextual value-added," which further accounted for pupil background and demographics. More data has also been published alongside performance measures, such as data on the workforce, spending and pupil attendance. These performance tables are currently suspended due to the pandemic and it is not clear how and when they will be re-introduced.

As in the rest of the UK, performance tables have been subject to much criticism, with particular concerns that they create perverse incentives. Indeed, the Wolf Review in 2011 concluded that many schools had used so-called GCSE-equivalent qualifications to boost league table positions over the late 2000s.[92] As a result, many vocational qualifications no longer count towards headline measures in school performance tables. Performance measures have also moved away from threshold measures, such as the share of pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C, to remove perverse incentives to focus more attention on borderline pupils (i.e. those likely to achieve a grade C or D). The main measures currently used in England for secondary schools are Attainment 8, a continuous score that measures performance across 8 subjects (including English and maths), and Progress 8, which further accounts for prior attainment.[93] In primary schools, performance measures have also moved away from thresholds measures, such as the proportion of pupils achieving the expected level of literacy and numeracy at age

[88] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-42310494
[89] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/1448158.stm; http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/3137808.stm; http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/1109516.stm
[90] Burgess, S. Wilson, D. & Worth, J. (2013). *A natural experiment in school accountability: The impact of school performance information on pupil progress*, Journal of Public Economics, vol. 106(C), pages 57-67.
[91] https://gov.wales/school-categorisation-system
[92] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-vocational-education-the-wolf-report
[93] https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-performance-tables

11, towards greater use of continuous measures. This followed on from changes to Key Stage 2 assessments from 2017 onwards.

In summary, all four nations have moved away from the relatively broad league tables in operation over the 1990s and policymakers have been sensitive to concerns over perverse incentives. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, league table were abolished in the early 2000s and have never really returned in any form. In Wales, policymakers abolished league tables, but then moved to a school categorisation system based on a range of data and indicators. In England, league tables have been gradually reformed over time to include much more information and with a greater focus on continuous measures.

School Inspections

School inspections form a key element of the accountability system across all four nations of the UK. However, there are clear differences in the approach to inspections and nature of follow-up.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this report to go into the full details of the differences in the focus and content of school inspections, Figure 8.1 provides a summary of the overall systems and nature of follow-up where performance is deemed to be unsatisfactory or in need of urgent improvement.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, school inspections are undertaken by a dedicated body with responsibility for inspecting schools and other educational institutions. In Scotland, inspections are the responsibility of Education Scotland, which also takes on responsibility for managing the curriculum, school improvement and a range of other system-wide responsibilities.

Whilst the precise set of inspection areas differs across each nation, there is naturally a lot of commonality. All four nations focus on the quality of learning, teaching, overall levels of achievement, leadership and management, and safeguarding. In England and Wales, each inspection area is given one of four grades (from outstanding/excellent to inadequate/unsatisfactory). In Northern Ireland, the three inspection areas are given one of six grades from “outstanding” to “requires urgent improvement.” The system differs in Scotland, with 2 or 4 quality indicators selected for each inspection from a range of 15 quality indicators across three themes.

In England, these inspection grades are converted into a summary grade on the same scale. If schools are graded “Inadequate” overall, this is further subdivided into “Serious weakness” and the more serious “Special measures.” In the case of “Inadequate” summary judgements for local authority-maintained schools, the Secretary of State of is required to issue an Academy Order and the relevant Regional Schools Commissioner manages a conversion to a sponsored Academy. In the case of Academies or Free Schools receiving “Inadequate” judgements, the Regional Schools Commissioner can implement a range of measures, including transfer to a new academy trust or sponsor.

In Wales, there is no summary judgement unless schools are deemed to be performing poorly on a number of dimensions. In these cases, schools can then be graded as requiring extra reviews by Estyn, “Significant Improvement” or be placed in “Special Measures.” In the two more serious cases, Estyn is required to inform the Minister for Education. The school and local authority are required to submit action plans to rectify the problems and further monitoring visits are undertaken by Estyn (more regularly in the case of special measures). Schools deemed to have important or urgent areas for improvement are subject to further formal follow-up visits to ensure progress, with schools with urgent areas for improvement entering the Formal Intervention Process and receiving urgent external support.

Figure 8.1: School inspection systems across the UK

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Agency	OfSTED	Estyn	Education Scotland	Education and Training Inspectorate
Inspection areas	Quality of education; Behaviour & attitudes; Personal development; Leadership & management	Standards Wellbeing & attitudes to learning Teaching and learning experiences Care, support and guidance Leadership and management	Schools inspected on 2-4 of 15 quality indicators from 3 key themes (Leadership & Management, Learning Provision, Successes & Achievement)	Achievement and standards; Provision for learning; Leadership and management
Current Grades	**1.** Outstanding; **2.** Good **3.** Requires Improvement **4.** Inadequate	**1.** Excellent **2.** Good **3.** Adequate and needs improvement **4.** Unsatisfactory and need urgent improvement	**1.** Excellent **2.** Very Good **3.** Good **4.** Satisfactory **5.** Weak **6.** Unsatisfactory	**1.** Outstanding **2.** Very Good **3.** Good **4.** Important area(s) for improvement **5.** Requires significant improvement **6.** Requires urgent improvement
Summary Grades	As above, plus Inadequate divided into "Serious Weakness" and "Special Measures"	Low scores can lead to "Estyn review", "Significant Improvement" and "Special Measures"	No overall grade	**1.** "High capacity" for sustained improvement **2.** Capacity to bring about improvement **3.** Important area(s) for improvement **4**. Urgent area(s) for improvement
Sanctions or follow-up	Inadequate judgement results in an "Academy Order" or significant extra monitoring	Extra monitoring visits and notifcation to Cabinet Secretary if requires "Significant Improvement" or in "Special Measures"	Unsatisfactory leads to additional support from senior managers to make changes, working alongside staff in other schools/agencies	Important or Urgent areas for improvement will lead to follow-up inspection and external support

Notes: England (**https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework**) Wales (**https://www.estyn.gov.wales/inspection-process/inspection-guidance?sector=38**) Scotland (https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/what-we-do/inspection-and-review/inspection-and-review-sector-specific-guidance/secondary-school-inspections/ ; **https://education.gov.scot/improvement/self-evaluation/hgios4/**) ; Northern Ireland (**https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/chief-inspectors-report-2016-2018**)

One particular feature of recent school inspections in Northern Ireland is that many teachers and leaders have refused to cooperate with inspections since 2017 as part of action short of a strike.[94] This is in protest against teacher pay and conditions, particularly the workload associated with inspection visits.

[94] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-38523598

This has clearly made inspections more difficult and more limited in the areas they can assess. Action short of a strike was concluded in March 2020.[95]

In Scotland, there is no overall grade or judgement, which would be difficult in any case as only a subset of quality indicators are assessed on each visit. However, schools receiving unsatisfactory grades on particular quality indicators receive additional support from senior managers to make improvements and they are often expected to work alongside staff from other schools and agencies.

None of the countries adopt a firm and fixed time schedule between each school inspection. Instead, they mostly use a risk or sampling-based approach, with schools inspected based on factors likely to shape the impact of an inspections, e.g. a change of management, school organisation, time since last inspection and exam results.

Despite this, there are different expectations and practices across each country. In England, schools are inspected about once every four years, unless they are judged to be "Outstanding," in which case they are exempt (though can still be inspected if there are significant school changes or reasons to suspect this outcome might no longer apply).[96] In Wales, legislation stipulates that all schools must be inspected at least one every seven years.[97] The most recent summary of school inspections in Scotland suggests that about 250 schools in Scotland were inspected in 2018-19, about 10 per cent of the nearly 2,500 schools in Scotland.[98] The most recent Chief Inspector's report for Northern Ireland shows that about two thirds of primary and post-primary schools were inspected in the two years between July 2016 and June 2018. This evidence suggests that school inspections are more frequent in England and Northern Ireland than in Wales and Scotland.

In summary, there is clearly a lot of similarity in terms of the inspection areas covered across the four nations. There is, however, a slight difference of approach in Scotland where only 2-4 of 15 quality indicators are judged in each inspection and the agency responsible for inspection (Education Scotland) is also responsible for many other system-wide activities, such as implementing the new curriculum. Follow-up measures in the case of unsatisfactory or inadequate grades are most severe in England, where changes in governance often follow in quite an automatic way.

Regional and National Agencies

One issue that is worth highlighting further is the growing role of regional and national agencies in the school accountability system across all four nations.

In England and Wales, these are mostly regional or sub-national organisations. In England, the Regional School Commissioners play a key role in school improvement when any school receives a poor inspection outcome, either through conversion to an Academy or changing the governance of existing Academies and Free Schools. One can also think of Multi-Academy Trusts as a further example of new sub-national organisations in the school accountability system. They are directly responsible for the performance of schools in their trust and can take on new schools that have previously received poor inspection outcomes. In Wales, the Regional Consortia play a key role in driving school improvement, providing

[95] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52400528

[96] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/828451/School_inspections_-_a_guide_for_parents.pdf

[97] https://www.estyn.gov.wales/faq/how-often-does-estyn-inspect

[98] Education Scotland, School Inspection Findings 2018-19 (https://education.gov.scot/media/it1fksuk/briefing1-school-inspection-findings.pdf)

more support and challenge to schools in higher support categories on the national school categorization system.

In Scotland and Northern Ireland, there is now a large role for national agencies. In Northern Ireland, the Education Authority of Northern Ireland (established in 2015) takes responsibility for the provision of many education services. The Education Authority, the schools councils (the Controlled Schools' Support Council and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools) play key roles in monitoring supporting school improvement. Education Scotland (established in 2011) takes responsibility for many elements of school accountability, such as direct responsibility for inspections, implementation of Curriculum for Excellence and professional learning. In addition, 'Regional Improvement Collaboratives' were established in 2018 to facilitate greater collaboration between local authorities and Education Scotland on school improvement within given regions.[99]

Accountability in practice and within schools

We have already seen from section 7 how schools across the UK differ in their use of tests and assessment data, which is clearly an important component of accountability and quality assurance. This showed that virtually all schools monitor progress from year to year and the vast majority compare their performance against national and regional benchmarks, though the latter appears to be declining over time across all four nations. A slightly higher share of schools in Wales and Northern Ireland compare their performance with other similar schools.

Figure 8.2 further compares the quality assurance activities conducted by schools in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. On the whole, these are extensive, with cross-national differences relatively minor. Schools in Scotland are less likely to have a written specification of student achievement standards than in the rest of the UK. On the other hand, schools in Scotland and Wales are more likely to seek written feedback from pupils than in England and Northern Ireland. Almost all schools in England have some kind of teacher mentoring programme (99 per cent), with the figures in Northern Ireland (86 per cent) and Scotland (87 per cent) lower, but still very high. Finally, schools in England (83 per cent) and Wales (89 per cent) were more likely to have regular consultations with experts aimed at school improvement than in Scotland (69 per cent) and Northern Ireland (70 per cent).

Figure 8.2. A comparison of quality assurance activities of schools across the UK

	England	NI	Wales	Scotland
Written specification of the school's curricular profile and educational goals	98%	98%	97%	97%
Written specification of student performance standards	94%	97%	96%	85%*
Internal evaluation/Self-evaluation	100%	99%	100%	100%
External evaluation	95%	93%	96%	94%
Seeking written feedback from students	79%	79%	90%*	94%*
Teacher mentoring	99%	86%*	95%*	87%*
Regular consultation aimed at school improvement with one or more experts over a period of at least six months	83%	70%*	89%*	69%*

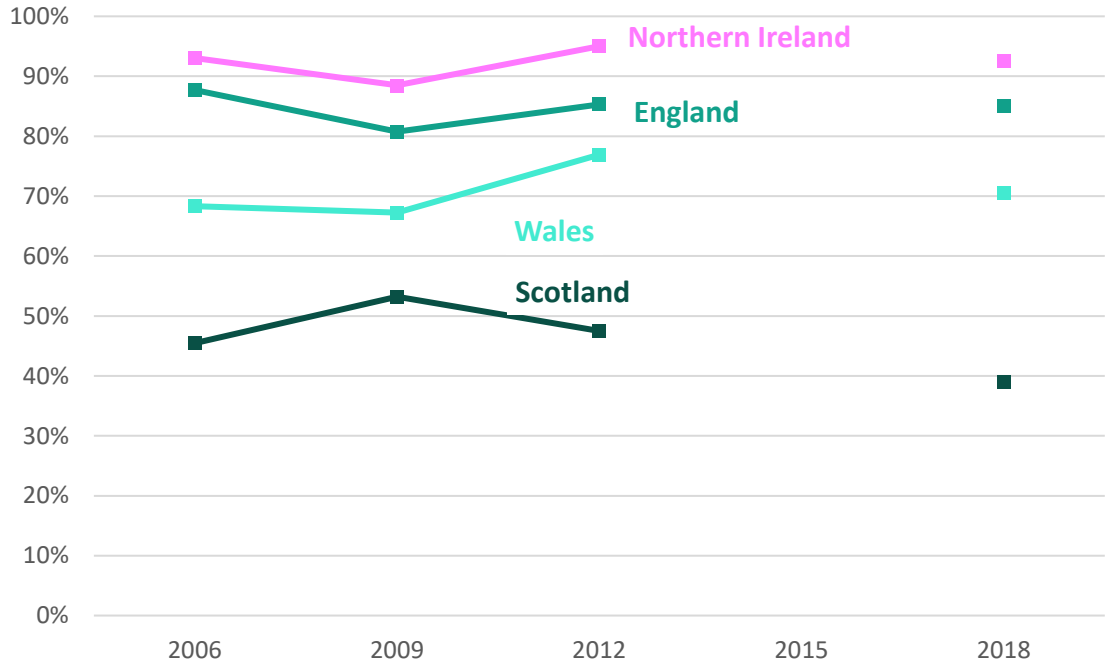
Notes: * indicates statistically significant difference from England at the five percent level. Data pooled between PISA 2012 and 2018.

[99] https://spice-spotlight.scot/2020/01/06/rics/

Figure 8.3 turns to the extent of competition amongst secondary schools for pupils. Clearly this will be influenced by multiple factors, including geographic location, accessibility and the way school admissions are determined. It may also reflect headteachers perceptions of who their "competitors" are. In Northern Ireland, a very large share of schools report having two or more schools competing for pupils in their local area. There are also notably more schools competing with one another in Northern Ireland and England than in Wales and, particularly, Scotland. Specifically, around 90 per cent of headteachers in Northern Ireland and 85 per cent in England reported that there were at least two schools in the local area that they were competing with for pupils. This compares to around 70 per cent in Wales and less than 50 per cent in Scotland. In most cases, these figures have remained broadly stable between 2006 and 2018, though there appears to have been a decline in Scotland (from over 50 per cent in 2009 to under 40 per cent by 2018).

Such differences will be strongly influenced by differences in geography and arrangements for school admissions. However, they are also a genuine reflection of headteachers' perceptions of the extent of school competition. The scale of the difference also suggests that policymakers' efforts to reduce the role of league tables and school competition in Wales and Scotland may have fed through to the way headteachers perceive the system.

Figure 8.3. The percentage of secondary schools where headteachers report two or more schools competing for pupils within the local area



Source: PISA headteacher questionnaire

Summary

In summary, the four nations have adopted quite different approaches to school accountability over the last 20 years. England has maintained a set of performance tables and expanded them to cover more data to reduce perverse incentives. In sharp contrast, all other nations abolished formal league tables in the early 2000s. Wales has since adopted a school categorisation system, which triggers different levels of external support. The approach to school inspections also differs markedly, with poor inspection outcomes triggering more formal and immediate action in England (such as an Academy Order or transfer of responsibility for existing Academies and Free Schools). However, all four nations have made

greater use over time of regional or national agencies as part of school improvement and accountability systems, such as Regional Schools Commissioners in England, the Regional Consortia in Wales, Education Scotland and the Education Authority of Northern Ireland.

Despite these differences in formal processes, there are some very strong similarities in the way schools actually approach quality assurance and school improvement. The vast majority of schools make year-to-year comparisons in standards and regional/national comparisons, though the latter has been declining over time. There are, however, some subtle difference in practices too, with schools in Scotland less likely to have a written specification of school standards, schools in Wales and Scotland more likely to seek written feedback from pupils, schools in England more likely to use teacher mentoring and schools in Scotland and Northern Ireland less likely to have regular consultations with experts.

Where there are much bigger differences is the perceived level of school competition among headteachers. Secondary schools in Scotland and Wales are much less likely to report facing local competition for pupils. This will partly reflect geography and admissions arrangements, but also reflect policymakers' efforts to create a school system less built around competition and league tables.

9. Conclusions

Even before devolution, there were longstanding differences in schools policies and institutions across the nations of the UK. Since devolution, there has been further divergence, particularly in the areas of governance, curriculum, assessments and accountability. To some extent, this reflects different overall approaches to education, and public services more generally, with a more market-orientated approach in England as compared with other three nations. In this way, devolution has allowed policymakers in the devolved administrations to tailor policies and institutions more towards local political preferences. The aim of this report was to document and describe these changes, rather than assess or evaluate their impact. With this in mind, a number of key trends do emerge.

First, there have been very different approaches to the role of local government and schools. In England, there has been a long-term and clear reduction in the role of local authorities in the running of schools, and a large increase in the role of individual schools. This can be seen in terms of the amount of spending decided by schools, an increasing role for schools in recruitment and staff pay decisions, and the conversion of many schools to Academy status, and therefore outside of local authority control entirely. In Wales, there has been little change to the role of local authorities over the last 20 years and they still play important roles in the running of schools, similar to the position in England in the early 2000s. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, there is a much larger role for local authorities and national government.

Alongside this, there has been an increasing role for regional or national agencies across all four countries, though they have played different roles. Most dramatically, the Northern Ireland wide Education Authority replaced the old Education and Library Boards, and this new authority plays a very substantial role in the school system. Education Scotland is an arms-length body with considerable responsibility, including the development of the curriculum and school inspections. In Wales, the regional consortia represent collaborations between local authorities on school improvement and professional development. In England, the regional school commissioners play a key role in accountability system, particularly with regards to failing schools. Multi-Academy Trusts have also played an increasing role over time, in some ways similar to that of local authorities.

Second, there has been very clear divergence on the curriculum. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have each adopted a curriculum that emphasises cross-cutting areas of learning and the development of skills. In principle, these curricula leave significant autonomy to schools and teachers to shape the precise content. In contrast, England has maintained traditional subjects and specific guidance on the minimum amount of material to be covered at each stage, though schools can obviously go beyond this. Despite the very specific curriculum structure, the role of national and local government in shaping course offerings and content is perceived to be lowest in England, and highest in Scotland and Northern Ireland. These differences seem to coincide more generally with the role of national and local government in shaping school decisions. Achieving a teacher-led curriculum is clearly a significant challenge in systems where local and national government play a big role in wider school governance.

The curriculum is clearly a fundamental element of the school system and knowing the effects of these different policy approaches would be very valuable. However, evaluating the effects of these different choices is a significant challenge. One needs cross-country data on similar metrics over time, with PISA representing the only real source of such data. However, many other factors are changing across countries over time that could drive such trends. Furthermore, a fair assessment would need to consider the fact that a deliberate aim of the curricula in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is to develop wider skills and awareness.

Third, the four nations of the UK have each carved out their own approaches to assessments and examinations over the last 20 years. Having abolished SATs in the early 2000s, Wales and Scotland have both re-introduced external tests in some form to assess pupil progress, inform teacher judgements and assess national benchmarks. Most dramatically, England, Wales and Northern Ireland have increasingly diverged on GCSEs and A levels. England has changed the grading system for GCSEs and focused on linear end of course assessments. Wales and Northern Ireland have maintained the A*-G grading system for GCSEs, retained AS levels and a modular system of assessment for both GCSEs and A levels. As in the early 2000s, Scotland has continued to maintain a different set of end of school academic qualifications.

The divergence on qualifications shows that education policymakers have increasingly used their devolved powers in this area to reflect national policy priorities. An ability to innovate and tailor policy to local preferences can be seen as benefits in and of themselves. However, this also presents risks, with many young people moving across nations for university and work. If universities and employers find it hard to navigate and understand an increasingly complicated system, then there is a clear risk that certain young people could be disadvantaged. The exam regulators across England, Wales and Northern Ireland are making significant efforts to align outcomes and standards wherever possible, and to communicate the changes. However, there is already evidence to suggest that pupils with grades that are meant to have similar meanings can score quite differently in PISA tests.[100] Future research will need to continue to assess the comparability of grades across the four nations. This will require comparable testing data across the four nations, with PISA being the only real source of such data at present. Further into the future, it will be important to compare the labour market outcomes for pupils getting grades with similar descriptots across the nations.

[100] Jerrim, J. 2021. PISA 2018 in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Is the data really representative of all four corners of the UK? *Review of Education* (forthcoming)

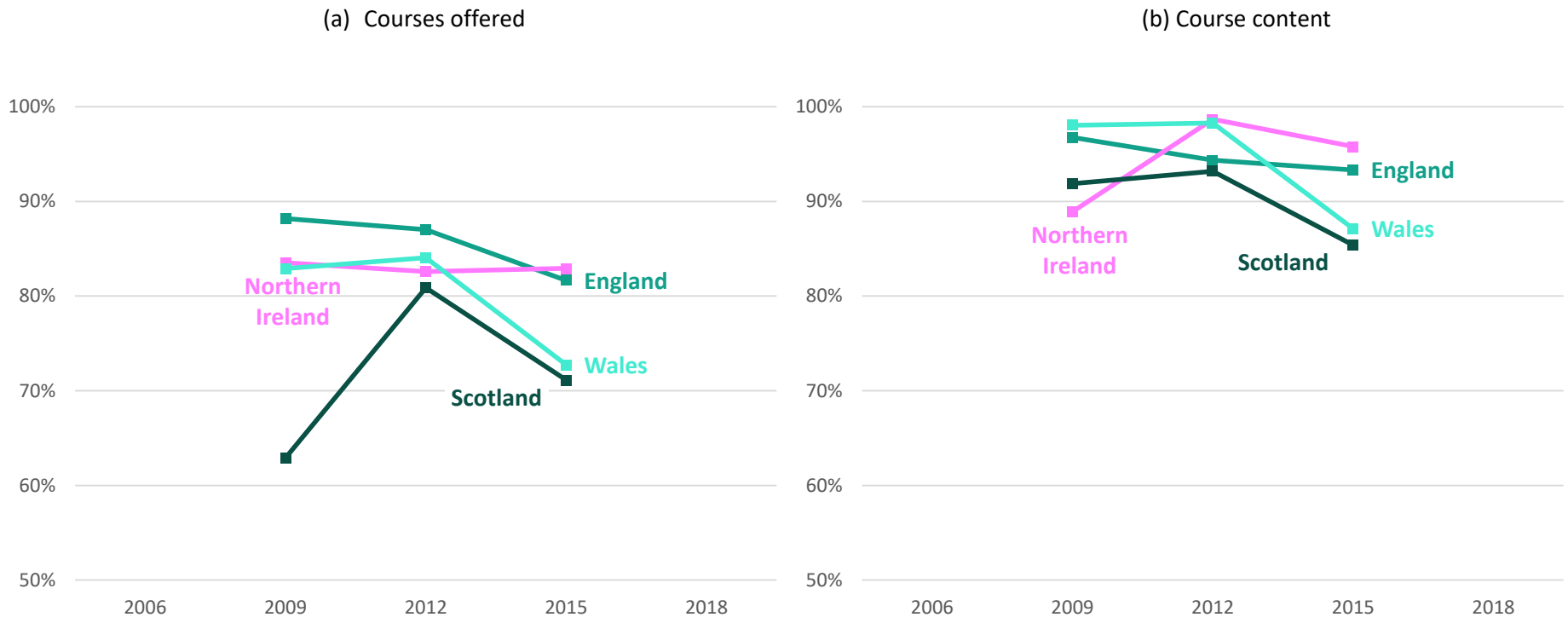
Finally, there have been clear differences in approaches to school accountability since the early days of devolution. Policymakers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland moved quickly to abolish league tables and adopt less market driven approaches to the school system. In contrast, England has maintained performance tables, though has gradually expanded their content over time to reduce perverse incentives. Over the last 10 years, Wales has since adopted a school categorisation system, which triggers different levels of external support. The approach to school inspections also differs markedly, with poor inspection outcomes triggering immediate changes in school governance in England (such as an Academy Order or transfer of responsibility for existing Academies and Free Schools).

These different approaches do feed through into school perceptions, with secondary schools in Scotland and Wales much less likely to report facing local competition for pupils. This will partly reflect geography and admissions arrangements, but also reflect policymakers' efforts to create a school system less built around competition and league tables.

In a future report this summer, we will seek to complement this by looking at differences in cognitive skills across the four nations from ages 3 to 14. This will help to build up a richer picture of the differences across the four nations. However, the data we will use relates to a single cohort born around 2000/2001. There is therefore a real need for more regular data comparing the skills and educational attainment of children across the UK. The ESRC is currently considering the possibility of a new cohort study. If this is started, then it should certainly include high-quality measures of cognitive skills. Additional data need not come from new tests or data collection, however. It could also come through more systematic collation of the within-year assessments produced by assessment agencies across the UK. The ongoing pandemic clearly poses significant challenges for data comparability, but such data would have obvious long-run benefits in allowing for greater understanding of the effects of policy changes, and the comparability of qualifications across the UK.

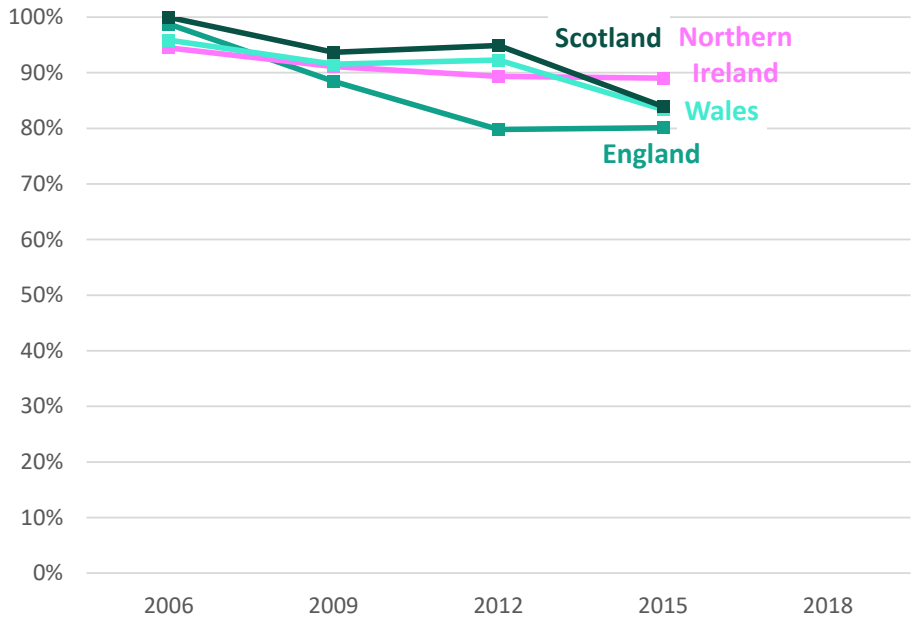
Appendix A - Trends over time in who has responsibility for determining course offerings and content within schools

Teachers have a considerable responsibility for (a) deciding which courses are offered and (b) course content

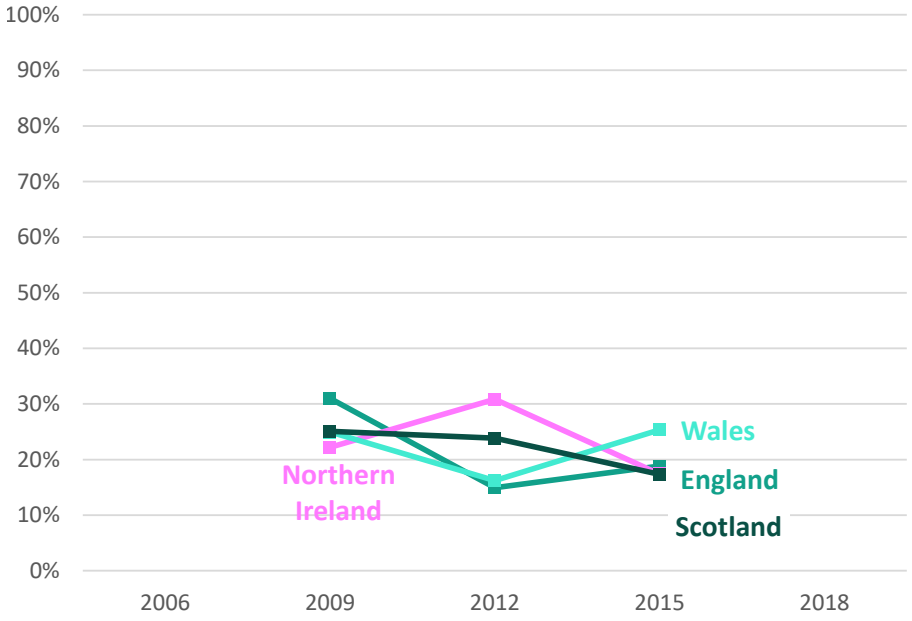


<u>Headteachers</u> have a considerable responsibility for (a) deciding which courses are offered and (b) course content

(a) Courses offered

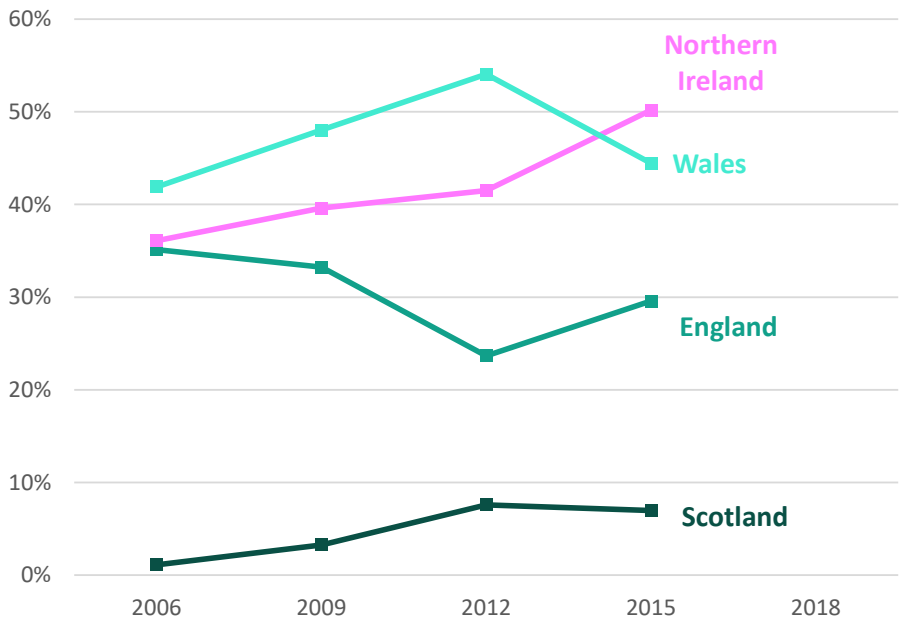


(b) Course content

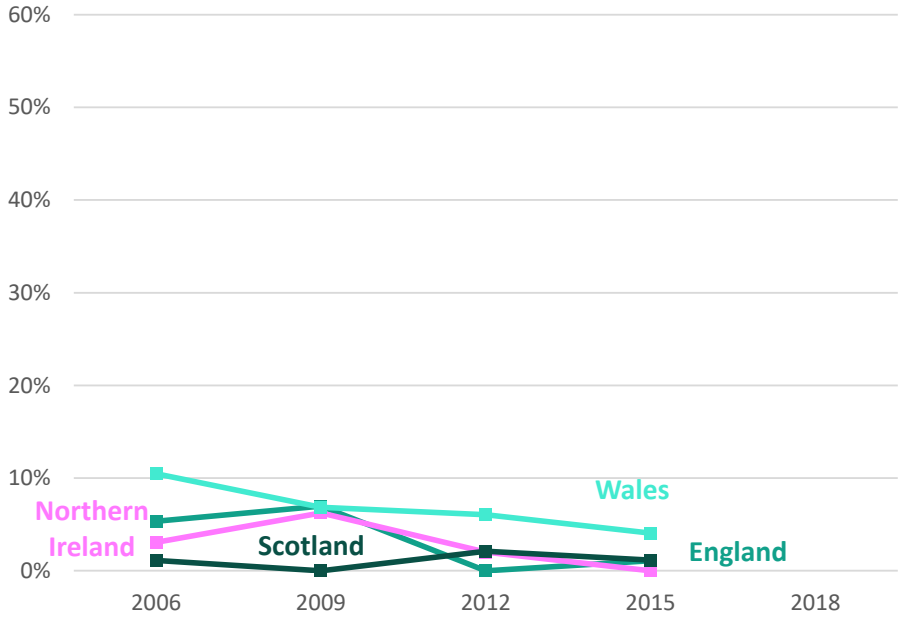


<u>Governors</u> have a considerable responsibility for (a) deciding which courses are offered and (b) course content

(a) Courses offered

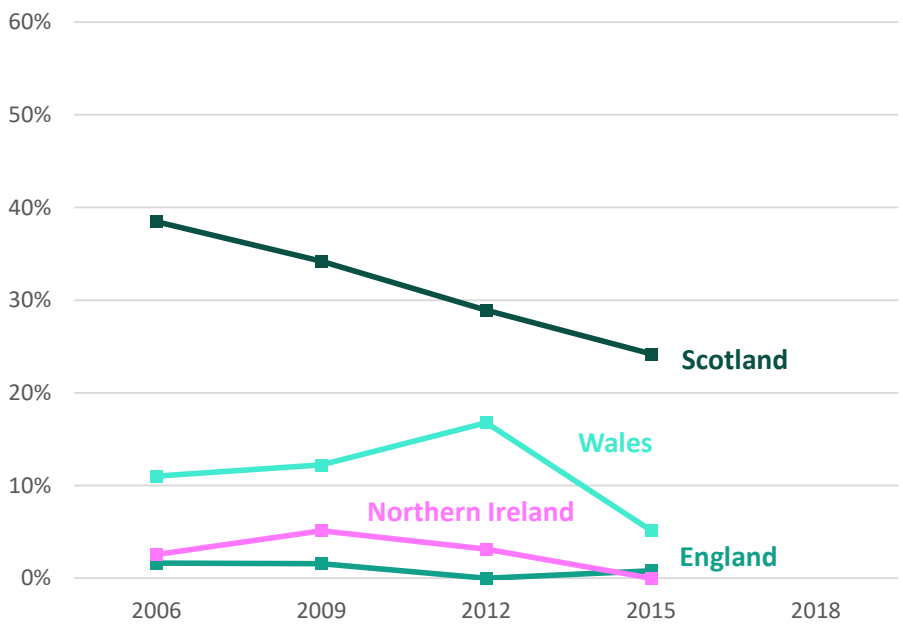


(b) Course content

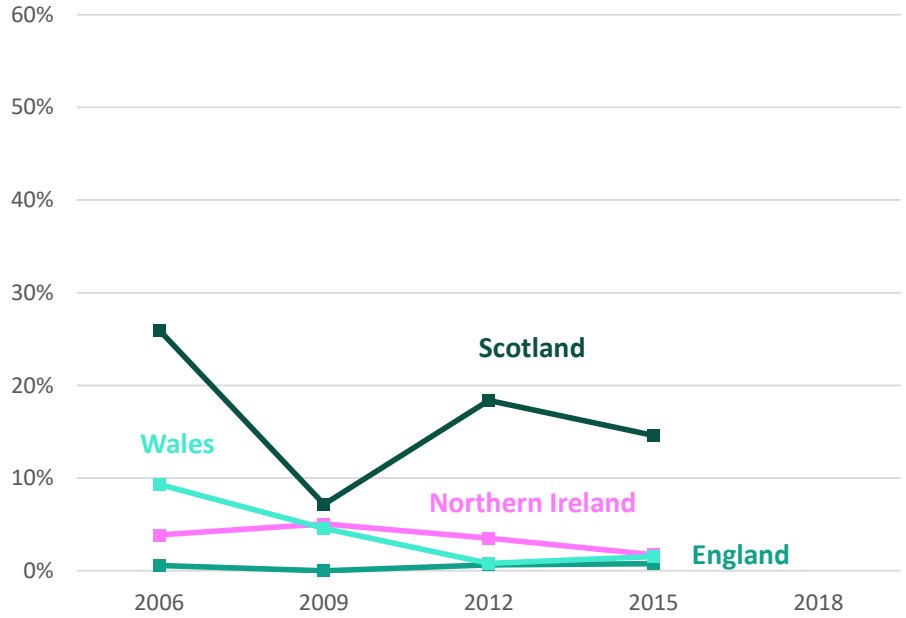


<u>Local/regional government</u> have a considerable responsibility for (a) deciding which courses are offered and (b) course content

(a) Courses offered



(b) Course content



National government have a considerable responsibility for (a) deciding which courses are offered and (b) course content

(a) Courses offered

(b) Course content