Policy on school autonomy over curriculum development

A case study of four upper secondary schools in Iceland

Kolfinna Jóhannesdóttir

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor

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Ágrip

Í þessari rannsókn er sjónum beint að stefnu um aukið sjálfstæði framhaldsskóla á Íslandi yfir þróun námskrár. Meginrökin fyrir setningu stefnunnar árið 2008 voru aukin þörf fyrir fjölbreytt nám vegna samfélagslegra breytinga og vaxandi fjöldi nemenda sem fer í framhaldsskóla eftir að hafa lokið grunnskóla. Markmið rannsóknarinnar er að auka skilning á því hvernig þessi stefna hefur verið skilin og framkvæmd af hagsmunaðilum skóla og hverju hún er talin hafa áorkað fyrir nemendur. Tilviksrannsókn í fjórum framhaldsskólum var hönnuð til að rannsaka áhrif stefnunnar bæði með hliðsjón af aðstæðum hvers skóla og með samanburði milli skóla. Tvær meginuppsprettur gagna eru notaðar: viðtöl sem frumheimildir og ritaðar heimildir til að lýsa skólum og aðstæðum þeirra og styðja við gögn úr viðtölum. Skólarnir voru heimsóttir árið 2018 og viðtöl tekin við stjórnendur, kennara, foreldra og nemendur.

Rannsóknin sýnir hvernig samspil margvíslegra aðstæðubundinna þátta hafði áhrif á hvernig skólarnir skynjuðu svigrúm sitt og getu til að nýta stefnuna til að gera breytingar. Í þessu samhengi höfðu einkum áhrif skiptar faglegar skoðanir, fjárhagslegar áskoranir og hindranir og val nemenda. Niðurstöður sýna misræmi milli væntinga stjórnenda og kennara til stefnunnar og þess sem þeir upplifðu þegar kom að framkvæmd stefnunnar í staðbundnu samhengi. Þetta tengdist að miklu leyti áhrifum frá öðrum stefnuáherslum sem voru í gangi á sama tíma, einkum styttingu á námstíma til stúdentsprófs, auknu skrifræði og flóknari stjórnsýslu. Framkvæmd stefnunnar framkallaði áskoranir í starfi leiðtoga skóla sem stjórnendur breytinga, sérstaklega í tengslum við áhrif stefnunnar á starfsöryggi kennara. Með hliðsjón af yfirlýstum markmiðum stefnunnar og hverju hún hefur áorkað fyrir nemendur þá eru vísbendingar um að fjölbreytni náms hafi aukist en að áhrifin séu mismunandi milli skóla og milli námsgreina, sem dregur fram mikilvægi þess að skilja áhrifin í tengslum við sérstakar aðstæður hvers skóla. Þrátt fyrir að nemendur hafi greint frá því að aukinn sveigjanleiki og áhersla á símat í stað lokaprófa hafi leitt til þess að námið henti þörfum þeirra betur, þá finnast enn hindranir fyrir jöfnu aðgengi að námi sem tengjast árangri í bóknámi og landfræðilegum og lýðfræðilegum takmörkunum. Í tengslum við niðurstöður rannsóknar eru lagðar fram tillögur er varða þróun á stefnunni. Jafnframt er dregin sú ályktun að frekari aðgerða sé þörf ef stefnan um sjálfstæði skóla og skólaval eigi að geta virkað saman á árangursríkan hátt með hliðsjón af staðbundnum aðstæðum á Íslandi.

Lykilorð:

Sjálfstæði, námskrárþróun, framhaldsskólar, tilviksrannsókn, framkvæmd stefnu, Ísland.

Abstract

This thesis explores the policy on increased school autonomy over curriculum development in upper secondary schools in Iceland which was introduced in 2008. The main arguments for the establishment of the policy were the need for more diverse study due to societal changes and the growing numbers of students entering upper secondary schools after completing compulsory education. The aim of this study is to increase understanding of how this policy has been understood and enacted by school stakeholders and what they believe it has accomplished for students. A multiple case study of four schools was designed to explore the implications of the policy, both within the context of each school and also across the schools. Two main sources of data are used: interviews as the primary source and documents to provide contextual data on the schools and support evidence gathered from the interviews. The schools were visited in 2018 and interviews were conducted with school leaders, teachers, students and parents.

The study demonstrates how the interplay between a range of contextual factors influenced the way each school perceived their scope and ability to utilise the policy to make changes, notably divided professional beliefs, financial challenges and barriers, and the impact of students' choice. Findings reveal a disparity between what school leaders and teachers expected from the policy and what they experienced when enacting it in their local context. This was largely due to the impact of other policy initiatives, notably the shortening of the study time for matriculation, increased bureaucracy, and more complex administration. These created challenges for school leaders as managers of change, particularly in relation to the policy's impact on teachers' job security. In terms of the stated aim of the policy and what has been accomplished for students, evidence of greater diversity of study was identified, but this varied considerably between schools and across subjects, demonstrating the importance of understanding the policy effects in relation to the specific context of each school. While students reported that greater flexibility and moves away from summative assessments had created study better suited to their needs, barriers to equal access to study remain, due to academic, geographical and demographic constraints. The study concludes by providing recommendations for policy development and suggesting that further measures are required if the policy and students' choice are to function together effectively in the Icelandic context.

Keywords:

Autonomy, curriculum development, upper secondary schools, case study, policy enactment, Iceland.

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

MoE	Ministry of Education, Science and Culture
NPM	New Public Management
VET	Vocational education and training

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1 Introduction

The topic of this research is an initiative towards increased autonomy in upper secondary schools in Iceland. The policy was established by law in 2008 and entailed a transfer of responsibility over curriculum development from the Ministry of Education (MoE) to the schools. Central descriptions for study programmes were no longer issued and schools were given increased freedom to structure their study programmes and develop study offers to better meet the different aims and needs of their students, local communities, education institutions, and the economy (MoE, 2004, 2011a). The main arguments for a less centralised curriculum were an increased need for diverse study due to societal changes and the fact that more students were starting upper secondary school right after completing compulsory education. Schools were believed to be better placed than the MoE to adapt study programmes to meet local needs because of their detailed knowledge and understanding of their local contexts (Parliamentary Document 320, 2007-2008). This study is intended to meet the need for greater understanding of the policy by exploring its enactment from the perspectives of different stakeholders, namely, school leaders, teachers, parents, and students, within different school contexts. The term 'enactment' is used in this study to reflect "an understanding that polices are interpreted and translated by diverse policy actors in the school environment rather than simply implemented" (Braun et al., 2010, p. 549). A multiple case study of four schools was designed to explore the implications of the policy within the context of each individual school and also across the schools to create a more comprehensive picture.

Polices on school autonomy can take different forms but generally include some degree of decentralisation of authority to make decisions on aspects of the curriculum, the use of funds, and the management of human resources (OECD, 2018a, 2012; Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Eurydice, 2007; OECD, 2004). While the focus of this study is on decentralisation from the state to schools, distribution of authority can also occur between other levels within the system, such as from the state to municipalities and counties (Bray, 2013; Welsh & McGinn, 1999). The motives for school autonomy across different countries have typically been linked to broader political and administrative trends and different objectives. Some initial reforms in countries like the USA and Australia were associated with the idea of improving education by empowering those who work at school level and reducing bureaucracy (Suggett, 2015; Gobby, 2013; Bimber, 1993; Chubb & Moe, 1991). The rationale, which remains a motive for polices on school autonomy today, relates to the belief that those who work closest to students are better aware of their needs and more likely to take decisions on the use of resources that serve students (Hooge et al., 2012; Caldwell, 2008; Clune &

White, 1988). According to Eurydice indicators, upper secondary schools in Iceland, along with schools in Scotland, the Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, and Estonia, are considered to have the highest degree of autonomy over various aspects of the curriculum among the 42 education systems within the Eurydice network.[1] In addition, upper secondary schools in Iceland are among those considered to have the most autonomy over managing human resources and the use of public funds (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020).

Much of the focus on decentralisation in education was influenced by the New Public Management (NPM) approach in the 1980s and 1990s, which involved widespread restructuring of public service to make them more effective and efficient (Suggett, 2015; Kowalczyk & Jakubczak, 2014; Eurydice, 2007; Tolofari, 2005). NPM strategies have differed between countries and service sectors; however, they have typically involved more market-driven ideologies, such as privatisation, decentralisation, consumer choice and competition, accountability, measurements of performance, and discipline in the use of resources (Ferlie, 1996; Ministry of Finance, 1993; Hood, 1991). In education, this led to the decentralisation of responsibility to schools, more choice and power to students and parents, greater community participation in schools' affairs, and a stronger focus on measurements of outcome (Kowalczyk & Jakubczak, 2014; Tolofari, 2005).

The various combinations of school autonomy and accountability mechanisms associated with NPM have led to numerous studies investigating how effective school autonomy is with regard to student achievement and different outcome measures (Caldwell, 2016; Grattan Institute, 2013; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Santibanez, 2006; Hattie, 1990). However, results are mixed, and critics report a shortage of evidence on how school autonomy and accountability are improving students' achievement. Recent research has highlighted how the movement towards greater school autonomy combined with accountability and market mechanisms creates tension around social justice and can impact equity in education in negative ways (Keddie et al., 2020b; Keddie, 2016; Smyth, 2011). Evidence also suggests that high degrees of autonomy can lead to differences in the quality of provision and create hierarchies among schools (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020).

However, little is known about how schools use their autonomy to make changes and improve schooling in different contexts and under different levels of autonomy (Neeleman, 2019). Recent research has highlighted the need to take schools' broader contexts more seriously (Holloway & Keddie, 2020; Ball et al., 2012; Thrupp & Lupton,

[1] The Eurydice "report covers 42 education systems, including the 27 EU Member States, and the United Kingdom, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Switzerland, Iceland, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Turkey" (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020, p. 24).

2006), with more attention given to location, materials, student intake, and culture, rather than aspects related to schools' internal organisation and practice, such as leadership and pedagogy (Ball et al., 2012; Thrupp & Lupton, 2006). In addition, calls have been made for greater understanding about how policies on school autonomy influence the working conditions of school leaders and teachers and school climates (OECD, 2018b).

The impact on students, as key stakeholders of schools, cannot be overlooked either. The NPM trend is generally believed to have increased the policy focus on greater freedom of choice for students, and, thereby, on competition between schools to improve the quality of education. However, student choice is a complicated concept. It is generally assumed that parents and students want some "form of diversity" (Glatter et al., 1997, p. 9), and one of the intended aims of the policy on school autonomy over curriculum in Iceland was to increase the diversity of study offers and provisions to better meet students' different aims and needs. However, research suggests that, with some policies on school autonomy, there might be a 'disparity' between the reality of students' choice and the formal policy intentions (Teelken et al., 2005).

As the above discussion indicates, school autonomy is a complex phenomenon to investigate. While the broader ideology and rationale might be similar between countries, objectives and strategies are varied (European Commission/EACEA/ Eurydice, 2020; OECD, 2013; Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Eurydice, 2007), and there will be differences in how schools within countries utilise autonomy for change and improvement. Some schools may take up policies and regulations that frame their autonomy while others do not (Caldwell, 2016). In addition, autonomy over one resource impacts other resources, which can make it complicated to realise the actual scope of autonomy (Bullock & Thomas, 2002). Schools' autonomy is, therefore, surrounded by enabling or restraining factors, and these can lead to differences between the intentions of polices, as expressed in official documents, and policy in practice. Thus, in researching policy on school autonomy, it has been argued that the questions need to relate to the 'who' and 'what' of autonomy: *who* has autonomy and under *what* control and constraints (Simkins, 1997).

The factors discussed above laid the foundation for the approach of this study, which explores policy on school autonomy from the perspectives of different school stakeholders. Emphasis is placed on considering the specific context of each school and the challenges in the working contexts of school leaders and teachers in relation to autonomy over the curriculum. There is also a focus on students' views on their freedom of choice of school and study and how it might impact the function of curriculum autonomy in different school contexts. The overall aim of the study is presented below, along with an outline of the thesis structure; however, the next section discusses the researcher's positionality and the personal motivation which inspired the research.

1.1 Personal motivation

I was employed as the head teacher of a small school in the Icelandic countryside in 2011, the same year as the new National Curriculum Guide was issued, with instructions on the implementation of the new law on greater autonomy for upper secondary schools. The school was quite young and had been offering two study programmes for matriculation and a single study programme for disabled students. I was fortunate to have a highly-experienced assistant head teacher, to whom I will be ever thankful for all the support in interpreting the new policy documents. We started working on policy soon after the new Guide was issued, with a focus on what students would want and what it would be possible to add to the school's existing offer. It was, however, clear that the school was too small to be able to offer vocational study programmes and that students also had the option of going to a comprehensive school in a nearby town, which had a dormitory. My school needed a certain number of students to be able to keep the current study offer, and the comprehensive school also needed a certain number to be able to offer different vocational study programmes. So, to some extent, there was competition between the two schools for the same students.

The result was that we offered a new study programme in sports science, which was believed to be of particular interest to students in our community. However, this initiative created some dilemmas within the school related to resources, professional beliefs, and interests. In a context where the number of students is limited, the offer of a new study programme with new teaching subjects can reduce enrolment in other programmes and courses, so something then has to be dropped. This situation raised the issue of which teaching subjects should be prioritised and caused some tension regarding teachers' job security. However, there were also other options to increase students' choice. A new open study programme with considerable free selection[2] gave students more choice about the composition of their study without needing to add new courses. Then we conceived the idea of cooperating with a local university on a shared study programme in natural sciences and agriculture. This initiative came at no extra cost but added to students' choice. There was also discussion in the school on changes in the content of each subject and the need to adapt to teach 21st century skills. Teachers had the freedom to make changes in their individual subject, but I remember that what mattered most for them was that students would be well prepared for university.

When meeting other head teachers at that time, I noticed that some were taking greater

[2] 'Free selection' refers to students' ability to select courses from the school's supply of different subjects as part of their study programme. While there can be free selection in specialised study programmes, for example, social science study programmes, it is more common in what are known as 'open study programmes'.

advantage of the policy to make changes than others. This seemed to be linked to both national events and their individual contexts. For example, at the national level, there was discussion of financial cuts in schools at that time and a dispute over teachers' salaries, and, in my third year as a head teacher, there was pressure from the MoE to shorten the study time for matriculation from four years to three. This idea was not new, and there had previously been opposition to it among teachers. However, the school I was leading had been organised as a three-year school from the very beginning, so I did not experience the same challenges in this respect as many other school leaders did.

When I reflect upon my experience, I feel that research is needed to shed light on how schools in Iceland have experienced the scope of their autonomy in practice and what the new policy is believed to have achieved. Not all schools are the same, and this raises the question of how different contextual factors have affected their policy work. I also think of the dilemmas I experienced in my school. Are there different issues and tensions in different schools which have arisen with the advent of the policy? I believe better understanding of the challenges schools have faced could support future policy making where school autonomy is in focus and lead to greater understanding of the development of individual schools.

1.2 The aim of the study

The overarching aim of this research was to increase understanding of how the policy on school autonomy over curriculum development at upper secondary level in Iceland has been understood and enacted by school stakeholders and what they believe it has accomplished. The research questions developed to achieve this aim are presented in Chapter 4.5 in relation to the gaps which were identified from the literature review. The research approach was a multiple case study of four upper secondary schools, and the main data collection consisted of interviews with school leaders, teachers, parents, and students from the four schools.

Although school autonomy has been a trend in education reform in many countries for decades, understanding of the function of such policies is still believed to require strengthening (Holloway & Keddie, 2020; Ball et al., 2012; Thrupp & Lupton, 2006). This study will contribute to the international literature which considers national contexts when studying the function of policy on school autonomy over the curriculum. The high level of school autonomy over curriculum development in Iceland makes the research context especially interesting. By including the perceptions of various stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers, parents and students, from four schools, the multiple case study design of the study will contribute to a more holistic understanding than many other studies, which have tended to view school autonomy primarily from the perspectives of educational staff. The study will, in particular, support future policy making in upper secondary school matters in Iceland by providing greater knowledge and understanding of the challenges schools face in relation to utilising school autonomy to make changes in their study offer.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured into nine chapters, each addressing a particular aspect of the study. This first chapter has provided a short introduction to the topic and the broader international context. Selected literature has been provided to justify the approach adopted, the overall aim has been introduced, and the rationale for the study explained. Chapter Two introduces Iceland, the research location, outlining its socio-economic and geographical context, describing its upper secondary school system, and setting its current education policy in its historical context. Chapter Three describes the development of the conceptual framework for the study. Chapter Four presents a literature review on policy on school autonomy structured around the key concepts within the conceptual framework. Chapter Five explains the methodology used in the study and the rationale for the chosen approach. The multiple case study design and methods of data collection and analysis are also described and their trustworthiness discussed. Chapter Six presents findings from the four case studies, and Chapter Seven presents the findings from cross analysis of the case studies. In Chapter Eight, the findings are discussed in relation to the literature review and the research questions. Chapter Nine highlights the main findings, explaining how they contribute to a greater understanding of policy on school autonomy over the curriculum, identifies the limitations of the study, then offers recommendations for policy development and suggestions for future research.

A note on translations

Much of the data which was gathered for this study was in Icelandic. Where official documents are not available in English, extracts have been translated by the author. Equally, where the Icelandic publications discussed in the literature review chapter are not available in English, direct quotes have been translated by the author. The use of translation in this study is also discussed in the methodology chapter (See Chapter Five).

2 National context and the upper secondary school system

Educational policies need to be understood and examined with respect to schools' individual contexts but also within their national context and the organisation of the school system. Furthermore, education policies at a given time do not exist in isolation from former policies, other legislation, national challenges, and international trends. Therefore, and in line with the aim of the study, this chapter examines the national context within which Icelandic schools operate, starting with a description of the main geographical, social, and economic character of Iceland. It then sets out the structure of the Icelandic school system, with a focus on the upper secondary level, the different types of schools, and the main challenges they face. It concludes by setting current policy making at upper secondary level in its historical context, placing specific emphasis on education policy on school autonomy over curriculum development as the focal point of this research.

2.1 Geographical and socio-economic context

Iceland is an island country in the North Atlantic with close to 369,000 inhabitants (Statistics Iceland, 2021a). It covers an area of 103,000 km^2, which makes it among the most sparsely populated countries in Europe (WorldAtlas, 2020). There are 63 towns and urban nuclei located all over the country; however, about 64% of the population live in the area around the capital, Reykjavík, in the southwest. Only six percent of inhabitants live in the more rural areas of the country (Statistics Iceland, 2020b).

Iceland is historically, culturally, and geographically part of a region in Northern Europe known as the Nordic countries. The region includes the sovereign states of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.[3] Although they have their own characteristics, they share high welfare, equality, and employment rates and stability in economic growth. Investment in education, research and innovation is generally considered high by international standards (Grunfelder et al., 2020).

The economy of Iceland has traditionally been driven by its natural resources: fishery and energy. However, recent years have been characterised by growth in tourism and

[3] The Nordic region also includes the autonomous countries of Faroe Islands and Greenland, which are part of the Kingdom of Denmark, and Åland, which is part of the Republic of Finland. https://nordregio.org/publications/state-of-the-nordic-region-2020/

construction industries. The government sector is organised into two levels: central government and the municipalities. Central government is responsible for health services, courts, foreign affairs, upper secondary and tertiary education, and infrastructure construction, such as transport systems, amongst other things. The municipalities are responsible for day care, pre-primary, and compulsory education. They are also responsible for local planning, some local infrastructure, social services, and other tasks which have been assigned to them by different laws and regulations (Central Bank of Iceland, 2018). In terms of local autonomy, Iceland is considered highly decentralised in comparison to many countries within the EU, the Council of Europe and the OECD (European Commisson, 2022).

Iceland was hit hard by the international financial crisis in 2008, which led to a contraction in gross domestic product and an increase in unemployment, and the subsequent years were marked by cuts in public spending and tax increases. However, the cuts were not applied universally; for example, while expenditure on education and health services decreased, expenditure on various welfare efforts and transfers to households and lower income groups increased (Ólafsson, 2014). After several years of gradual recovery, the balance of the general government was in surplus in 2016, unemployment had reduced, and the overall economy had stabilised and become stronger (Central Bank of Iceland, 2018).

The National Audit Office's 2014 report on the operation of upper secondary schools in the years after the crisis noted that government spending for upper secondary schools decreased by 12.7% between 2008 and 2012. The main austerity measures involved reducing the number of staff, increasing the number of students per group, cutting some small and costly study programmes, and decreasing the support services provided to students. Despite these cost saving measures, more than half of the schools were still running a deficit in 2013 (The Icelandic National Audit Office, 2014). However, according to a report from the MoE (2020), school finances improved between 2016 to 2018, and most schools were in surplus in 2017 and 2018. It also points out that expenditure for upper secondary schools has not decreased since 2013, despite there being fewer students due to the shortening of the study time for matriculation, meaning the government now makes a higher contribution per student (MoE, 2020).

2.2 The upper secondary school system

The school system in Iceland comprises pre-primary schools (age 1-6), compulsory elementary level education (age 6-16), upper secondary education (in general age 16-19 or older), university, and further education. Upper secondary education in Iceland is not compulsory; however, the enrolment rate for those starting upper secondary school right after elementary level has gradually increased over the years and is now around 95% (Statistics Iceland, 2019a). Public schools are the most common form of education

at upper secondary level, accounting for over 80% of enrolments (Statistics Iceland, 2019b). However, the minister of education can grant accreditation to private schools which must then operate, to a large extent, according to the same legal and regulatory frameworks as public schools. The minister is also authorised to make service agreements with private schools which include a financial contribution from the state budget (Upper Secondary Education Act No 92/2008).

There are currently 27 public upper secondary schools and three private schools funded by the state budget (Parliament, 2021). As of 2016, most of these schools are comprehensive schools, with a unit-based system, offering both academic and vocational study or mainly academic study. Five schools are academic schools with class-based system and three are vocational schools (MoE, 2020). In schools with a unit system, students have more flexibility of study time and choice of study path. In the class-based system, students stay in the same class throughout, meaning that students on the same study programme are together most of the time. There are also various specialised schools offering study at upper secondary level in art and music and for specific industries, such as fisheries, although, in some cases, the study period is shorter (Statistics Iceland, 2019b). The total number of students enrolled in day school in Autumn 2021 was 17190, and these were divided between 17 schools in the countryside and 13 in the capital area (See Table 1).

Table 1: Upper secondary schools on state budget: status, location, and number of students

Upper secondary schools on the state budget	**Number of schools**	**Capital area**	**Countryside**	**Number of students**
Public schools	27	11	16	13946
Private schools	3	2	1	3244
	30	**13**	**17**	**17190**

Source: (Statistics Iceland, 2019b)

These secondary schools operate in different local contexts, and there is a significant difference in the average number of students per school between the capital area and the countryside, with an average of 889 and 331 enrolments per school respectively (See Table 2). 13 schools in the countryside have fewer than 500 students and 10 have fewer than 250. In the capital area, by contrast, all schools except one have more than 500 students, with four enrolling more than 1000 students.

Table 2: Classification of school by number of students and location

Location	Number of schools	Number of students	Average number of students	1-250	251-500	501-750	751-1000	1001-1250
Capital area	13	11560	889	0	1	6	2	4
Countryside	17	5630	331	10	3	1	3	0
	30	**17190**						

Source: (Statistics Iceland, 2019b)

Figure 1 shows the distribution of upper secondary schools in the country, with over 40% clustered in the capital area (bottom left-hand corner of the map).[4] This reflects the fact that Iceland is a sparsely populated country, with more than half the population living in the southwestern region. This uneven distribution means rural schools are small, with long distances between them, making it difficult for them to offer a diverse range of study programmes to suit students' needs and interests compared to those in the capital area.

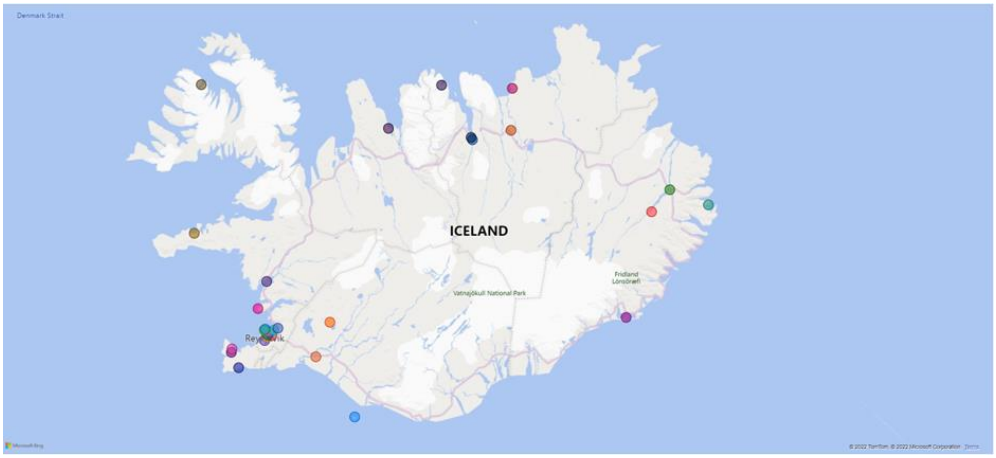

Figure 1: Map showing the locations of upper secondary schools in Iceland. (Directorate of Iceland, 2022). https://mms.is/framhaldsskolar-thjonusta

The main challenges at upper secondary level in Iceland highlighted by national government and in international comparisons have been high drop-out rates and the low proportion of students completing their studies on time (OECD, 2016, 2015; Parliamentary Document 320, 2007-2008; MoE, 1994). For example, according to

[4] The location of these schools was mapped by the Directorate of Iceland using data and services provided by TomTom and the Microsoft Corporation

Statistics Iceland, 23% of students who started upper secondary school in 2015 had dropped out four years later, 60% had graduated, and 17% were still studying (Statistics Iceland, 2020a). However, while OECD indicators of educational attainment in 2009 showed that 26% of 25 to 34 year olds in Iceland had not completed upper secondary education (OECD, 2011), this had fallen to 19% by 2019. This was part of a trend across OECD countries, where the proportion of young adults without upper secondary education decreased on average from 20% to 15% by 2019 (OECD, 2020). When considering drop-out and non-completion from school it is important to remember that youth career trajectories are different, and, as Albæk et al. (2015) found in their study of youth unemployment and inactivity in four Nordic countries, "non-completion when aged 21 does not automatically imply that the young person is an early school leaver or a school drop-out having serious difficulties in coping with economic and social life." (Albæk et al., 2015, p. 278).

Within this context, it is noteworthy that the proportion of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) over the last two decades has been low in Iceland compared to many other countries, except for the years immediately after the economic crisis in 2008 (OECD, 2023; Arnardottir, 2020). However, the low rate of students choosing vocational study right after compulsory education is also of concern. In Spring 2020, 72.2% of students enrolled in academic study for matriculation, with just 15.2% on vocational programmes and 12.6% on preparatory courses[5] (Sigbjörnsson, 2020b). However, it has been pointed out that many students change their choice of study programme when they are older and chose to start vocational education later on (Sigbjörnsson, 2020b; MoE, 2020, 2015a, 2014a); this draws attention both to the flexibility in the Icelandic school system (Blondal et al., 2011) and to students' career uncertainty when starting upper secondary school (Blöndal & Ægisdóttir, 2013).

2.3 Education policy at upper secondary school level

This section begins by discussing the first holistic Upper Secondary Education Act in 1988 and then traces changes in policy until 2008, when the current policy was introduced. In addition, the influence of NPM is considered alongside changes in students' freedom to choose between schools. The timeframe for enacting the policy on school autonomy over curriculum in 2008 is also discussed, along with the major challenges in the schools' contexts at that time.

[5] Data is taken from INNA, the school registration system for upper secondary schools, as of 1. October 2020. For further information about the categorization of study programmes, see Sigbjörnsson, 2020b.

2.3.1 The first holistic upper secondary education act in 1988

The first holistic legislation for upper secondary schools in Iceland was established in 1988 and replaced various legislation for different schools and school types which had evolved over the years (Upper Secondary Education Act No 57/1988). The different types were mainly grammar schools, with strong traditions of academic study for matriculation, vocational and industrial schools, which had developed since the late nineteenth century, and comprehensive schools, which have been established across the country since the 1970s (Jónasson & Óskarsdóttir, 2016). The comprehensive schools were introduced with the aim of increasing students' opportunities to choose from different vocational and academic study programmes in line with their interests and abilities. The provision of both types of study programmes within the same school was intended to make it easier for students to move between them as their interests evolved and to make their status more equal (Parliamentary document 146, 1972).

2.3.2 Towards operational autonomy of schools and a centralised national curriculum

The first public coordinated National Curriculum Guide for upper secondary schools was issued in 1986 and revised in 1987 and 1990; however, in each case, these curricula were similar, and mainly seen as a formal registering of existing arrangements (Þorkelsson, 2011; Harðarson, 2010). In 1992, the minister of education at that time established a committee to work on policy making and the revision of existing laws for elementary and upper secondary schools. A report by the committee, published in 1994, highlighted slow study progress among students at upper secondary level and high drop-out rates (MoE, 1994). It also pointed out that, despite the aims in establishing the comprehensive schools, "the weight of academic study had increased greatly in the last years at the cost of vocational study" (p. 48). The committee's suggestions for improvement were influenced by education policy trends in neighbouring countries at that time, and they proposed a decentralisation of decision making to schools in parallel with increased accountability (MoE, 1994). This led to parliament passing the new Upper Secondary Education Act (No. 80/1996) in 1996.

School autonomy over decision making on school operations was supposed to increase by strengthening the management of the schools, and the focus was on better defining the role of head teachers and school boards,[6] with the latter taking on increased

[6] Every upper secondary school in Iceland has a school board, which now includes five members - three nominated by the ministry and two by the municipality. There are also three observers, one nominated by the teachers, one by the students, and one by the parents. These observers do not have voting rights, but they can propose motions and address meetings. The head acts as director of the board and consults members about staff recruitment and other matters within the school (Upper Secondary Education Act no 92/2008).

responsibility for school budgets (Parliamentary Document 96, 1995; Upper Secondary Education Act No. 80/1996). The composition of the boards was also revised, with the number of MoE representatives increasing from one to three, the municipalities nominating two members instead of three, and two representatives of the teachers and students becoming non-voting observers instead of members with full rights (Upper Secondary Education Act No. 80/1996; Upper Secondary Education Act No. 57/1988). However, it remained unclear how the new legislation would increase school autonomy in reality (Ingimundardóttir, 2004; Jónsdóttir, 1996), as the influence of school boards was not believed to be especially significant (Ingvason, 2008).

Another main objective of the new legislation in 1996 was to facilitate changes in study offers (Parliamentary Document 96, 1995). This entailed, amongst other things, a reduction in the number of academic study programmes for matriculation from 13 to three: Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Languages. It was argued that this would increase consistency in study, simplify organisation, and enable more targeted monitoring of students' achievement. However, students would still have a choice of specialisation and free selection within the study programmes. There was a strong emphasis on diversity, notably in the case of vocational programmes, and the Bill stated that most changes in the study offer should be in the field of vocational study. A new administration of vocational study was introduced, with increased participation of economic stakeholders in public policy making and developing curricula for vocational study. These included a committee on cooperation on vocational study and occupational councils. The focus was also on increased specialisation between schools, which was believed to be a prerequisite for offering good quality study across the country (Parliamentary Document 96, 1995).

Another initiative was that the admissions requirements for different study programmes, which had been abolished in 1988, were re-introduced. The Act also entailed standardised tests in specific subjects and obliged schools to conduct internal evaluations, with schools' methods of self-evaluation to be assessed every five years by an external party (Upper Secondary Education Act No. 80/1996). There were also some ideas which were proposed and developed but which did not reach the final stage; these included proposals to shorten the study time for matriculation from four years to three and to shorten vocational study programmes to align the total study time with that in other European countries (Upper Secondary Education Act No. 80/1996, Parliamentary document 96, 1995; MoE, 1994).

The National Curriculum Guide issued in 1999, following the law in 1996, was much more detailed than the former ones (Reynisdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2013; MoE, 1999). Descriptions were provided for the three study programmes for matriculation, including lists of core subjects, which subjects could be offered for specialisation in each study programme, and the overall amount of student choice within this arrangement. There was also a description for a three-year study programme in art. Furthermore, various

supplements were issued with descriptions for the courses within the subjects, setting out their specific aims. Descriptions of study programmes for certified trades and other vocational subjects largely drew on existing arrangements and included detailed lists of the academic and vocational subjects to be taught in each programme and the overall division of time between study in school and in the workplace (MoE, 1999).

The 1999 Guide has been described as "the Ministry of Education's first real attempt to centralise content of study and teaching at upper secondary school level" (Reynisdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2013, p. 3). Policy focus on consistency and monitoring was judged to have increased (Ingimundardóttir, 2004) while flexibility in the study offer reduced (Jónsdóttir, 1996). However, the policy's emphasis on standardised tests was short-lived; they only took place for two years, in Icelandic in 2004 and in Icelandic, English and Maths in 2005 (Harðarson, 2010). The next issue of the Guide was introduced in 2004; however, it entailed only minor changes and drew on the same education policy as introduced by law in 1996 (MoE, 2004).

2.3.3 Policy changes towards school autonomy over curriculum

Early in 2006, the minister of education at that time and the Icelandic Teachers' Union agreed 10 steps for school reform. These included a comprehensive revision of legislation for pre-primary, elementary, and upper secondary schools and reinforcing teachers' education (MoE & Icelandic Teachers' Union, 2006). In the case of the political agenda for the upper secondary schools, the emphasis of the government, led by the Independence Party and the Social Democrat Alliance in 2007, was on more diverse study and increased school autonomy:

> Focus will be on quality, flexibility and diversity in the supply of courses, to enable all students to find a suitable field of study. The number of courses will be expanded, with more emphasis on freedom of choice for students and individual-based study, [with the aim] among other things, to reduce the secondary school drop-out rate. .... Increased professional and operational independence of schools will be aimed for, and less centralisation.
>
> (Government of Iceland, 2007, p. 4)

This emphasis was also reflected in the output of working groups established by the same minister of education in connection with the review of legislation for upper secondary schools.

In a report from a working group on diversity and flexibility in the organisation of study it is argued that a more diverse supply of study is needed because of increased number of students attending upper secondary school with different educational backgrounds (Ministry of Education, 2007). Suggestions are made regarding increased flexibility for schools to develop their study offer and thereby increase students' choice.

Reference is also made to the fact that international studies on academic performance identify a positive correlation between increased school autonomy and academic performance (Haahr et al., 2005; Ministry of Education, 2007). A report from a working group on vocational study similarly proposes that schools are given increased freedom to organise more diverse study. High drop-out rates from Icelandic upper secondary schools by comparison with other OECD countries are highlighted, and the need to better meet the needs of these students (Ministry of Education, 2006). Influences from international policy trends also appear in the reports from the working groups. For instance, it is suggested that the development of students' study consider key competences in line with the focus of the European Union (EU) and OECD (Ministry of Education, 2007). The idea that work in progress by the EU on the European Qualification Framework could have a positive impact in Iceland due to the way it connects learning outcomes within upper secondary schools with study taking place outside schools is also highlighted (Ministry of Education, 2006). Suggestions on the composition of the study programmes for matriculation with regard to core subjects, specialisation, and students' selection meant that the core would be decreased, despite being low by comparison with the study programmes for matriculation in other Nordic countries at that time (Ministry of Education, 2007). Abolition of the division between vocational and academic study was also emphasised and the idea that all the subjects beyond the core would be equally evaluated (Ministry of Education, 2006).

The outcome was a new education policy in which school autonomy over study offers and curriculum development was greatly increased. The arguments for the policy were set out in the parliamentary Bill as follows:

> A growing number of students who graduate at elementary level enrol in upper secondary schools, but a significant number drop out without completing the specified courses or final examination. General enrolment in upper secondary schools calls for a supply of study and arrangement of study which is in line with students' different aims and readiness. Reduced control from the education authority over study arrangements and the content of study means that schools are assigned increased responsibility and a role in assessing the need for each study offer. This also calls for a desired innovation where the schools have the knowledge of their situation and are able to respond to their local context, which can be quite different from place to place in the country.
>
> (Parliamentary Document 320, 2007-2008, p. 19)

As this quote reveals, and in accordance with the policy work in the run-up, the new policy on school autonomy was seen as a reform to increase flexibility and diversity in study provisions in order to reduce high drop-out rate and respond to societal change. The new Upper Secondary Act passed in 2008 transferred responsibility for the content

of education from the MoE to the schools and made various other changes. Schools were entrusted to make proposals and write descriptions for study programmes in accordance with the provisions of the Act. However, these descriptions had to be confirmed by the ministry in order to become part of the National Curriculum Guide. The new Act also required internal and external evaluation of schools to be strengthened to ensure the quality of education; however, no provision was made for standardised tests. Instead, a new unit system was introduced to assess students' work equally across different types of study. In this system students were to be awarded 60 units for one school year provided that they had finished their work with satisfactory results. The general assessment of students' study was still to be performed by teachers; however, this was now brought under the supervision of the head teacher, something which was not stipulated previously. Students also became entitled to study until the age of 18, and a new upper secondary school leaving examination was introduced for shorter study programmes. This replaced the former general study programmes for students who needed more preparation before going onto more advanced study programmes.

The new Act entailed little change in the governance of the schools; however, the school boards' responsibility for budgets and operations was reduced, and, instead, their involvement in policy making on study offers increased. In addition, a parents' representative was added to each board as an observer. The Act reaffirmed that the head teacher is responsible for the daily administration of each school, compliance with acts, regulations, and the National Curriculum Guide, and ensuring that the school's budget is adhered to. However, in a break with previous legislation, it also transferred responsibility for setting that budget to the head teacher (Upper Secondary Education Act No 92/2008; 80/1996). Changes were also made in the administration of vocational study. Each occupational council was now authorised to establish professional councils for each profession, and a new occupational committee replaced the former committee on cooperation on vocational study. The chairs of each of the occupational councils were now to sit on the occupational committee and advise the minister on policy making for vocational study (Upper Secondary Education Act No 92/2008; Parliamentary Document 320, 2007-2008).

A new National Curriculum Guide was issued in 2011, with various initiatives and an overall framework for the implementation of the new education policy. It was divided into two parts, namely, general guidance and study programme descriptions, with schools given responsibility to create their own programme descriptions based on the general guidance. The general text stated, amongst other things, that that the policy was

built on six fundamental pillars: literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity, which must be integrated into all study content and school activities. Study had to be structured within four qualification levels,[7] with learning outcomes defined in relation to knowledge, skills, and competences. The only requirements for subjects common to all study programmes (academic, art, or vocational) were that they had to include a minimum competence in three core subjects (Icelandic, Maths, and English), and that students were required to participate in sports. However, requirements for the study programmes for matriculation were more prescriptive: they were required to achieve greater competence in the core subjects, to include a minimum of 45 units, and to incorporate other subjects according to their specialisms. For the academic study programmes for matriculation, another Nordic language and a third foreign language were required, while other study programmes leading to matriculation had the same Nordic language requirement but included a choice of a third language, social studies, or science. Beyond these, there were no other requirements about what subjects or content should be included in the various study programmes. Furthermore, the new National Curriculum Guide also provided flexibility in the scope of study programmes for different types of graduation and qualification levels (MoE, 2011a). The focus in this study is on the second part of the National Curriculum Guide, and the extent to which schools were able to benefit from the greater freedom it aimed to provide.

2.3.4 Influence from New Public Management (NPM)

Education policies at upper secondary school level in Iceland, as in many other countries, have been influenced by the NPM trend for reforms aimed at increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector (Héðinsdóttir, 2012; Þorkelsson, 2011; Sigurðsson, 2008; Johannesson et al., 2002; Jóhannesson & Mýrdal, 1999). The government policy on NPM was introduced in Iceland in 1993, and the core aim was "to delegate power, increase responsibility and transfer decision making closer to the scene in order to increase operational efficiency and improve service" (Ministry of Finance, 1993). The first steps taken in the 1990s included implementing contract-making between the MoE and each upper secondary school in relation to its operation, in tandem with a focus on using an allocation model for school funding based on student numbers and other cost factors (Sigurðsson, 2008; Johannesson et al., 2002; Jóhannesson & Mýrdal, 1999). Before that, evaluation of the financial needs of schools had been decided through negotiations between officials and schools (Sigurðsson,

[7] The Icelandic Qualification Framework for Education builds on the European Qualification Framework intended to increase transparency between European education systems. Accessed 5. April 2021 https://mms.is/hvad-er-islenski-haefniramminn-um-menntun

2008). The implementation of self-evaluation and external evaluation during this period is also believed to be rooted in NPM (Héðinsdóttir, 2012). The aims of NPM were still in force in Iceland in 2006, and the government at that time agreed on a policy of further improvements in the field (Ministry of Finance and Economics, 2007). These initiatives were further developed and extended in the government education policy in 2008, with more comprehensive school contracts introduced and greater external evaluation (Upper Secondary Education Act No 92/2008).

2.3.5 Policy on students' freedom to choose their school

As discussed in Chapter 2, students in Iceland have the right to apply for admission to the upper secondary school of their choice. The Directorate of Education manages the application process, and students are asked to nominate two schools: their first preference and a second choice in case the first application is unsuccessful. There have been several changes in the way students' freedom to choose their school operates since the first holistic law for the upper secondary level was passed in 1988. In 1990, the country as a whole and the larger towns were divided into school catchment areas, with students given priority access to the nearest school within their area. However, the legal provision for this was abolished in 1996 by Upper Secondary Education Act (No. 80/1996). This change is thought to have been influenced by global trends in school choice related to the marketisation aspect of NPM (Bergsdóttir & Magnúsdóttir, 2018; Forsey et al., 2008). However, 14 years later, in 2010, the minister of education at that time changed the strategy again and specified that 45% of available spaces at each upper secondary school should be reserved for students from certain elementary schools, typically those located closest to each upper secondary school. In reality, this offered priority to students based on their address, as students in Iceland usually attend elementary schools close to their homes. However, after a complaint from parents, the Althingi Ombudsman[8] found that this requirement did not have a legal basis (The Althingi Ombudsman, 2010). As a result, in 2012, the minister issued a regulation which authorised schools to prioritise the admission of students from the local area; however, they were not obliged to do so (Regulation on Students' Enrolment, 2012). As schools are also allowed to set admissions requirements regarding preparation and academic results for enrolment in individual study programmes (Regulation on Students' Enrolment, 2008), in situations where schools receive more applications than there are places available, it is ultimately the school which chooses the student rather than the student choosing the school.

[8] The Althingi Ombudsman is appointed by the Icelandic parliament (the Althingi), to monitor the administrative activities of central and local authorities and to safeguard citizens' rights in respect of the country's authorities (Act on the Ombudsman of the Icelandic Parliament Althingi, No. 85 27 May 1997).

Timeframe and additional challenges

According to the policy established in the new Act (No 92/2008), upper secondary schools were supposed to review all their study programme descriptions in line with the new National Curriculum Guide before 1st August 2011. However, in 2010, implementation of this provision was delayed until 1st August 2015 (Act No. 71, 2010 amending the Act on Upper secondary schools no. 92, 2008). In the interim period, the MoE issued a white paper on education reform, which was published in 2014. This included the proposal to shorten the study time for matriculation from four years to three and work on shortening vocational study time as well. The stated aim was to respond to the low graduation rates from upper secondary schools by comparison with other countries, to reduce high drop-out rates, and address the fact that relatively few students were choosing vocational study (MoE, 2014b). The MoE therefore advised head teachers that upper secondary schools should work on shortening the study programmes for matriculation to three years before autumn 2015 (MoE, 2014c).

The above timeframe created significant challenges for upper secondary schools, as they were now obliged to shorten the study programmes at the same time as they had to decide whether to make changes in their study offer and to align the programme descriptions with the new National Curriculum Guide framework. However, this was experienced in different ways in unit-based, rather than class-based schools, notably comprehensive schools. The National Curriculum Guide 2011 stated that study for matriculation should comprise *at least* 200 units (MoE, 2011a), and the 2008 Act (No 92/2008) stipulated that students' full-time study should equal 60 units per school year; thus, completing 200 units within three years would require more than 'full-time' study when counted in units. As unit-based schools typically had greater flexibility in the study time for matriculation, the impact was more about organising matriculation with fewer units while in class-based schools, the shortening of study time by one year became more tangible.

The White Paper (2014) also set out goals regarding improving the literacy of students in compulsory education. In the case of both the shortening of the study time for matriculation and improving literacy, the reforms as introduced in the White Paper have been seen as based on experiences in other countries and education systems, in particular on a policy borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012) from a similar reform in Ontario in Canada (Magnúsdóttir & Jónasson, 2022; Ministry of Education, 2014). However, the political debate in Iceland on shortening the study time "can be traced back around 50 years" (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018b, p. 5). The reforms introduced in the White Paper have also been attributed to NPM policy trends, due to the emphasis on the efficiency of the education system (Jónasdóttir et al., 2023; Ministry of Education, 2014).

Another challenge for school leaders during this period was increasing teacher dissatisfaction with their salary levels, which led to the teachers' strike in the spring of 2014. The government and the teachers' union eventually reached a new collective agreement on higher salaries for teachers, which included systematic changes intended to help schools implement the new Act from 2008. This included changes in response to Article 15 of the Act, which stated that students' work should be assessed in standardised units, and the transfer of the implementation of professional schoolwork from contracting parties to the schools themselves. The new collective agreement also recognised that there would be 180 days for teaching and assessment (instead of the previous 175) and the removal of the previous division between teachers' working days and testing days. The new agreement also included a plan for drawing up and implementing a new working evaluation of teachers' work to support the Act's implementation (Ministry of Finance, 2014).

2.4 Summary

The topic of this research is the policy on school autonomy, as introduced in the Upper Secondary Education Act (No 92/2008), and how it has been perceived and acted on by different stakeholders at the school level. This chapter has set the policy in its broader geographical and socio-economic context, described the main characteristics of the upper secondary school system in Iceland, and traced the development of education policy for the upper secondary level since the first holistic policy was introduced in 1988. The main challenges at this level, highlighted by national government throughout the years, have been high drop-out rates, slow study progress, and the relatively low proportion of students attending vocational study. Various measures have been taken to try to address these issues, including major changes in policy on school autonomy over curriculum development, moving from highly centralised and prescriptive policy in the late 1980s to the National Curriculum Guide in 2011, with no descriptions of study programmes or courses issued from the centre. However, implementation of the Act was affected by the global financial crisis of 2008, leading to cuts in government contributions to upper secondary schools, and, a few years later, by major structural change, when schools were required to shorten the study time for matriculation from four years to three. Having described the context of the study, the next chapter explains the conceptual framework which supports the overall design and approach of this research.

3 Conceptual framework

This thesis examines the introduction of a new educational policy which aimed to increase schools' autonomy over the study programmes they offer to students. In this chapter the conceptual framework for the study is introduced, key concepts in the area of school autonomy are defined, and the relationships between them are explained. Drawing on existing literature, the chapter begins by exploring educational policy and the relationship between policy as a product and how it is enacted in schools. It goes on to consider school autonomy as a multi-dimensional concept, with particular reference to its impact on curriculum development, accountability, and students' choice. The chapter concludes by examining the positions of key school stakeholders, namely school leaders, teachers, parents and students, and exploring the enactment of policy on school autonomy from the perspectives of school leadership, teachers' autonomy, and students' choice. Together, these nested concepts provided the conceptual basis for this thesis.

3.1 Education policy

The first area of the conceptual framework concerns policy. This is a contested term, as policy occurs at multiple levels within an education system. This thesis explores the effects of a policy change introduced by the Icelandic government, so one which is ostensibly 'top down' in nature. However, policies have multiple layers of effect and application, especially where the aim is to allow schools greater autonomy, as is the case in this study. In addition, the meaning and definition of education policy within the field of research on public policy is not straightforward. However, because education, like, for example, health and social security, aims to improve the lives of people in society and affect social change, it can be seen as a subfield of social policy (Adams, 2014).

Various definitions of policy have evolved through the years (Bell & Stevenson, 2015; Adams, 2014; Taylor et al., 1997). Policy can, for example, be defined as "aims or goals, or statements of what ought to be happen" (Ken & Louise, 2013, p. 1) or "pronouncements of the government of the day with regard to aspects of social and public life" (Adams, 2014, p. 23). In this respect policy goals, ideas, and intentions in the public sector can be found in legislations or other official documents created and approved by governments (Ken & Louise, 2013). A further definition by Harman (1984) includes actions to be taken towards intended goals, and/or stances developed in response to a particular problem, describing policy as:

> the implicit or explicit specification of courses of purposive action being followed, or to be followed in dealing with a recognized problem or matter of concern, and directed towards the accomplishment of some intended or desired set of goals. Policy can also be thought of as a position or stance developed in response to a problem or issue of conflict, and directed towards a particular objective.
>
> (Harman, 1984, p. 13).

The above definitions share an emphasis on policy as a product of policy making. However, policy can also be understood as a process. The notion of process refers to the fact that policy is more than a document and includes different stages of policy making, "from the politics involved in the recognition of a 'problem' which requires a policy response, through the formulation and implementation stages, including changes made along the way" (Taylor et al., 1997, p. 24). In this thesis, the focus is on the stage of policy making where policy is put into practice.

The policy cycle approach by Bowe et al. (1992) can be helpful to better understand the relationship between the concept of policy as a product and how policies are put into practice. Their framework was developed in relation to case studies of education and curriculum policy in England and entails three main elements: a) context of influence, b) context of policy text production, and c) context of practice. 'Context of influence' is where various stakeholders, political parties and governments debate and influence what the education purpose and policy should be. 'Context of policy text production' is where education policy is presented in legislation, national curriculum guides, or other official documents. In this regard, Bowe et al. (1992) point out that policy text is sometimes unclear, and this can lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. The third part of the cycle is the 'context of practice'. This is where schools respond to policy text and consequences are experienced. As Bowe et al. (1992) make clear, polices are not simply "received and implemented," as those who work in schools "come with histories, with experience, with values and purposes of their own, they have vested interest in the meaning of policy" (p. 22). Therefore, because evaluation of policy in practice and how schools respond is dependent on interpretation, it is more relevant to speak of policy 'effects' rather than 'outcomes' (Bowe et al., 1992).

In this thesis the concept of policy will be understood both as policy document and process, where the former refers to the physical product of the government's policy making and the latter to how policy making takes place at different stages. In addition, Bowe et al. (1992)'s explanation of how policies are interpreted and responded to in different ways by those who work in schools will serve as a basis for exploring the process of putting policy on school autonomy into practice.

One of the main aims of this research is to examine the impact of the different contexts of upper secondary schools in relation to how they put policy into practice. While the policy cycle is helpful to clarify the relationship between policy documents and how policies are then put into practice, another concept is required to fully consider the impact of schools' individual contexts. In this regard, the concept of policy enactment as introduced by Ball et al. (2012) will be used. In line with the notion of policy making as a process, the "term enactment refers to an understanding that polices are interpreted and translated by diverse policy actors in the school environment rather than simply implemented" (Braun et al., 2010, p. 549). Therefore, the influence of a variety of factors in each school's context can explain differences in policy enactment between them (Braun et al., 2011). Ball et al. (2012) developed their theory of policy enactment based on a long-term study of four secondary schools in the UK, drawing on data from their study to categorise various contextual factors in schools into the following dimensions: a) situated contexts, b) professional cultures, c) material contexts, and d) external contexts (p. 21). In this regard, the notion of 'situated contexts' refers to factors such as "locale, school histories and intake" (p. 21), and includes related matters, such as the reputation of each school. 'Professional contexts' relates to "values, teachers' commitments and experiences, and 'policy management' in schools," (p. 21) and how such factors influence policy enactment. 'Material contexts' covers factors like "staffing, budget, buildings, technology and infrastructure" (p. 21), acknowledging that schools operate in different physical spaces and might be in different positions to attract teachers. 'External contexts' include "aspects such as pressures and expectations generated by wider local and national policy frameworks such as" [...] [reports from inspectors], "league table positions, legal requirements and responsibilities." (p. 36). This contextual dimension covers also "local authority support and relationship with other schools." (p. 36).

These contextual dimensions shed light on how policies are, for example, enacted in different material and professional contexts. Despite the above categorisation, these are interrelated and overlap, for example, "school intake is presented as situated but intake can in turn shape professional factors such as values, teachers commitments, experience, as well as 'policy management'" (Ball et al., 2012, p. 21). The concept of policy enactment in the above sense therefore plays a significant role in the conceptual framework of this thesis because it recognises that people respond to policy differently and highlights the ways in which schools' specific factors can work as enablers or constraints, exerting pressures which influence and explain the way they enact policy (Braun et al., 2011). The next section examines the concept of school autonomy, which provides the main policy focus of this study and forms a key part of its conceptual framing.

3.2 School autonomy

The main area of the conceptual framework relates to policies on school autonomy and, in particular, the meaning of school autonomy, based on an understanding that policies on school autonomy share some degree of decentralisation of power and authority from a higher level of authority in the system to schools (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Welsh & McGinn, 1999; Fiske, 1996; Clune & White, 1988). In the case of the policy on school autonomy at upper secondary level in Iceland, the transfer of power and authority was from the MoE to the schools. However, policies on decentralisation could also, for example, entail the transfer of authority from central government to regional governing bodies or municipalities (Welsh & McGinn, 1999). While the concept of school autonomy is therefore closely related to that of organisational autonomy in public organisations in general (Verhoest et al., 2004), the discussion here will be confined to upper secondary schools.

Various definitions of school autonomy have emerged within the literature and in different countries (e.g. Caldwell & Spinks, 2013; Walberg et al., 2000; Malen et al., 1990; Clune & White, 1988). A definition provided by Caldwell and Spinks (1998) is widely used (Suggett, 2015; Caldwell & Spinks, 2013; Caldwell & Spinks, 1998) and will serve as a base for understanding the concept of school autonomy in this research. They describe schools granted autonomy as 'self- managing' schools, and define them in these terms:

> a school in a system to which there has been decentralised a significant amount of authority and responsibility to make decisions related to the allocation of resources within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies standards and accountabilities.
>
> (Caldwell & Spinks, 1998, p. 4-5)

This definition is applied to public schools, but can also cover Catholic schools and independent schools, "to the extent that they must operate within frameworks of professional standards and accountability for use of public fund" (Caldwell, 2012, p. 5).

The definition by Caldwell and Spinks (1998) underlines the fact that school autonomy is a multidimensional concept and highlights two dimensions that are particularly significant for the development of the conceptual framework for this study. These relate to a) what kind of resources and activities have been devolved to schools; and b) the level of autonomy according to a centrally determined framework. In terms of resources, Caldwell and Spinks (1998) draw on Bullock & Thomas (1997) to offer a broad definition, which includes "knowledge, technology, power, material, people, time, assessment, information and finance (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988, p. 5). However, devolved resources to schools are generally divided into decision making over finances and human resources and aspects related to the curriculum (European

Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020; Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Eurydice, 2007; Clune & White, 1988). In the case of the policy on school autonomy in Iceland, the main change related to increased curriculum autonomy, so the concept of school autonomy and curriculum development is explained in more detail below.

School autonomy policies can also be different with respect to whether the motive for decentralisation is political or administrative. Forms of school autonomy where authority to make decisions is transferred to parents, students, teachers, or representatives from local communities by establishing school committees are considered political or democratic in nature. However, if the aim is to delegate authority and responsibility to the head teacher, or those who work in schools, then the decentralisation is seen as more administrative (Bray, 2013; Fiske, 1996; Ferris, 1992). Leithwood and Menzies (1998) provide four divisions according to who has been given authority over decision making for the decentralised function:

> Administrative control, in which the authority is devolved to the head teacher along with increased responsibility for efficient use of resources so as to better serve students.
>
> Professional control, in which teachers hold the main decision-making authority on the basis that those who are the closest to students and have local knowledge are best-placed to make decisions, for example, on curriculum aspects and budgets. Participation in decision making is also believed to increase commitment to the implementation of the decisions made.
>
> Community control, in which parents and the local community as such have the major decision-making authority. This form is based on the belief that the values and preferences of parents and the community should be reflected in the school curriculum.
>
> Balanced control, in which decision-making authority is shared by parents, community members and teachers.
>
> (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998, p. 328-333)

The above categorisation foregrounds another significant dimension of school autonomy: who has been given autonomy in the sense of having more authority over decision making. In this regard, the definition by Caldwell and Spinks (1998) is considered to highlight the autonomy of the school as an organisation when considering the delegation of authority to make decisions over predefined resources (Bullock & Thomas, 2002; Simkins, 1997). However, as Bullock and Thomas (2002) point out, the lines of delegation are not always clear, and the complexity of "how power over one type of resources interacts with another, such as staffing and pupil

admissions" can make it difficult to estimate the "sum of delegated power" (p. 8). As a result, they note that the term 'power' needs to be understood in a broader sense than simply as "decentralisation of authority to make decisions" (p. 7). In this respect, Simkins (1997) highlights how policy intended to increase school autonomy might not result in a real increase in power at the school level in practice due to increases in external control at the same time. He therefore proposes the following three questions as a framework for analysing school autonomy:

- Who is empowered and who is disempowered by the reforms?
- In respect to what are their powers increased or decreased?
- Under what forms of control and constraint must these powers be exercised?

(Simkins, 1997, p. 20-21)

The work of Bullock & Thomas (2002) and Simkins (1997) therefore draws attention to the fact that, although school autonomy might entail legitimised power, understood as authority to make decisions, the power of those who work in schools might be perceived differently due to their positions, the external control exerted on them, and the complex interplay of resources.

Winstanley, Sorabji and Dawson (1995) developed a model for examining the issues raised by Simkins (1997) within the context of policy changes in the public sector. Their model entails mapping stakeholders' perceptions of two dimensions of power: criteria power and operational power. Stakeholders in this regard are defined as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation's purpose" (Freeman, 2010, p. 53). The dimensions of criteria power and operational power can be used to shed light on the stakeholders' power to influence different aspects, and the results can then be mapped into a matrix. Examples of each type of power are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Model for mapping stakeholder power (Adapted from Winstanley et al., 1995, p. 20)

Criteria power	Operational power
• Define the aims and purpose of the service. • Design the overall system within which the service is provided. • Set or influence the performance criteria which guide public service activity. • Evaluate the performance of public services on the basis of these criteria.	• Provide the service and decide how to provide it. • Change the way the service is delivered on the ground, through the allocation of limited resources or by using knowledge and key skills.

Winstanley et al. (1995) used the model to understand the effect of the Education Reform Act 1988, an education reform in England and Wales, on stakeholders in schools. Their study revealed that teachers' criteria power before the education reform mostly resided in their autonomy over curriculum; however, an increase in external influence and assessment of performance was seen as reducing their power in this regard. Another example was how parents were empowered by changes in admission rules to allow a free choice of schools, which was considered as giving them more operational power. It also revealed changes in the power of head teachers and educational agencies. The advantage of the model as used by Winstanley et al. (1995) is that it takes different stakeholders into consideration and provides a tool to explain effects in terms of power and for understanding what policy change means in practice. As part of this study examines school stakeholders and their perceptions of the policy on school autonomy in Iceland, this model forms a key element in the conceptual framework presented here. Concepts which relate to stakeholders' different positions, as approached in this study, are covered in a later section.

Another aspect of the concept of school autonomy relates to policy effects. Bullock and Thomas (2002) argue that polices should be evaluated "in ways which are wider than their publicly stated purpose" and their consequences taken into consideration (p. 32). They propose that four concepts should be included when analysing the impact of decentralisation in schools: autonomy, accountability, efficiency, and equity, each of which "raises central questions against which systems can be assessed and compared" (p. 47). The questions raised by each of these concepts are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Four central questions (Adapted from Bullock & Thomas, 2002, p. 47)

Autonomy	Who is taking more and less control over decision making?
Accountability	Has the dialogue of accountability improved or worsened?
Efficiency	Has the match between resources and needs been improved or worsened?
Equity	Is the system more or less fair?

As Bullock and Thomas (2002) highlight "decentralisation is not necessarily good in itself," as "the virtues and otherwise of specific schemes [...] are contingent upon the wider educational purposes they are intended to support" (p. 2). In this respect, the authors draw particular attention to diversity and equity when it comes to establishing who benefits, and the need to consider the "distribution of educational opportunity between social groups, ... within social groups, ... and the needs of individuals." (p. 168). As such, they raise the issue of policy consequences in wider contexts beyond the specific aims of the policy in question. In this study, the concept of effect in the policy cycle as introduced by Bowe et al. (1992) and explained by Bullock and Thomas (2002) will serve as a basis for understanding the effects of the policy change at upper secondary level in Iceland. Having identified the concept of school autonomy adopted in this study, the next section discusses school autonomy in relation to the concept of curriculum development.

3.2.1 School autonomy and curriculum development

A key element in the conceptual framework relates to school autonomy over curriculum development, as the policy in Iceland was intended to increase schools' autonomy in this area. However, curriculum development can have different meanings and curricula are also composed of various components. For example, according to Clune and White (1988), school autonomy over curriculum development "refers to the delegation of decision making regarding the curriculum to the school site" (p. 4). However, it can also be understood as "a change that was the product of creativity within the school that led to a change in curriculum content" (Knight, 1985, p. 38).

Governmental policies on school autonomy over curriculum development are, in general, elaborated in national curriculum guides. As such, a curriculum can be viewed as a "plan that outlines goals, content and outcomes" (Lundgren, 2015, p. 5); however, a variety of other definitions exist (Marsh, 2009; Marsh & Willis, 2007). In this thesis, a curriculum will be understood as "an interrelated set of plans and experiences that a student undertakes under the guidance of the school" (Marsh and Willis, 2007, p. 13). This definition implies that the curriculum consists of three elements: a) the planned curriculum, which provides the written guidance, b) the enacted curriculum, which is mainly subject to how teachers provide the guidance, and then c) the experienced

curriculum, which is how the students ultimately receive the curriculum guidance (Marsh & Willis, 2007).

The concept of curriculum development is also a complicated area where various questions need to be answered, including fundamental questions such as 'What knowledge or competences is it most important to include in the curriculum given the limits on the time available for schooling?', or 'To what extent should the goals and content of education be regulated in a national curriculum guide?' (Kuiper & Berkvens, 2013; Marsh, 2009). The degree of school autonomy over curriculum development is then reflected in the extent to which schools are able to answer these questions themselves, within their individual contexts.

The degree of autonomy over curriculum given to schools has been examined with respect to six areas in the European context (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020; Eurydice, 2007). These are:

- Content of the compulsory minimum curriculum
- Curricula content of optional subjects
- Choice of teaching methods
- Choice of textbooks
- Flexibility to allocate instruction time
- Setting internal student assessment criteria

(European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020, p. 156)

In the case of Iceland, the main policy change in 2008 gave schools more autonomy over the organisation and content of the study programmes they offer. However, proposals for study programmes must still be confirmed by the MoE in order to become part of the National Curriculum Guide. As such, the National Curriculum Guide, became both a mandated curriculum, with various provisions which the schools are to follow, and a formal record of descriptions of study programmes designed and written by the schools. Within this context, the use of the term 'school autonomy over curriculum development' therefore refers to the schools' autonomy over the organisation and content of their study programmes. Having explained the way that autonomy over curriculum development has been defined and is understood in this thesis, the next section discusses school autonomy in relation to the concept of accountability.

3.2.2 School autonomy and accountability

Part of the conceptual framework concerns accountability and its relationship to school autonomy. As discussed above, this thesis draws on a definition of school autonomy provided by Caldwell and Spinks (1998), which implies that schools are accountable to central authority. Policies on school autonomy combined with accountability are often related to NPM reforms, which have been implemented in many countries, including

Iceland. The rationale for combining accountability with school autonomy is, broadly, the belief that it will improve schooling by promoting effectiveness and efficiency (Hooge et al., 2012).

Various definitions have been used in the literature to explain accountability, particularly the meaning of accountability within the public sector (Biesta, 2009; Bovens, 2007; Simkins, 1997; Sinclair, 1995; Hattie, 1990). In this thesis, the following definition by Bovens (2007) is used to provide an understanding of the concept:

> Accountability is a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences.
>
> (Bovens, 2007, p. 450)

In the case of the public sector, an actor can, for example, be an official or a public institution and the accountability forum can be an individual, such as a minister, or an agency or audit office. The definition by Bovens assumes that, while actors may face consequences, this does not necessarily have to be the case.

Forms of accountability mechanisms can include external evaluation, school self-evaluation, appraisals of teachers and school leaders, use of students' performance data from national standardised tests, and publication of results (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020; OECD, 2015, 2013; Hooge et al., 2012; Eurydice, 2007). Contracts between schools and higher education authority on duties and objectives and annual reports to ministries or local authorities are further examples of accountability mechanisms (Eurydice, 2007). It is common to divide the different forms of accountability mechanisms within education system into two types: 'vertical' and 'horizontal' (Hooge, 2016; Hooge et al., 2012) (See Table 5).

Table 5: Types of school accountability (Adapted from Hooge et al., 2012, p. 9)

Vertical	**Horizontal**
Regulatory school accountability	Professional school accountability
School performance accountability	Multiple school accountability

Vertical accountability is top down and hierarchical and can be divided into two subsections: a) regulatory school accountability and b) school performance accountability (Hooge et al., 2012). Regulatory accountability involves compliance with laws and regulations, and an example of such a mechanism is a report on the schools' operation to the MoE. Performance accountability mechanisms include standardised tests and public reports of school performance. Increased use of this form of accountability, accompanied by regulatory school accountability, has been linked to policies on decentralisation and the use of market mechanisms in education. Horizontal

accountability involves non-hierarchical relations and can also be divided into two subsections. Firstly, professional school accountability which is "directed at how schools and teachers conduct their professions" (Hooge et al., 2012, p. 9) and, secondly, multiple school accountability, which covers "how schools and teachers provide multiple stakeholders with insight into their educational processes, decision making, implementation and results" (p. 8).

Horizontal forms of accountability have been seen as ways to generate teachers' trust and promote professional accountability by "fostering teacher professionalism, developing professional standards, promoting collaboration and professional learning communities, and updating the pedagogical knowledge of teachers" (Cerna, 2014, p. 32). Similarly, schools' accountability to multiple stakeholders, including students, parents and other stakeholders, is aimed at generating trust from the local community (Cerna, 2014; Hooge et al., 2012). It entails, amongst other things, that schools work closely with different stakeholders, support them to learn about their rights and duties concerning education, and obtain their support for school polices (Hooge et al., 2012).

Accountability can also be understood in relation to the concept of professional responsibility. One way to explain the concept of responsibility is to distinguish "between feeling responsible and being held responsible" (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2011, p. 123). The former can be viewed as an internal sense of professional responsibility, meaning that individuals "hold themselves accountable" (p. 123), while the latter relates to formal accountability, meaning "those who are held responsible are judged as such externally" (p. 123). However, tension can arise "between being professional, responsible and being held accountable" (O'Donnell, 2017, p. 15). An example is if high-stakes testing impacts teachers' and school leaders' practices in a way that might benefit outcomes in the short term but, in the long term, "exacerbate[s] inequity and do[es] little to improve learning and teaching" (p. 16).

The accountability mechanism for upper secondary schools as stated in the 2008 Act (No 92/2008) includes both internal and external evaluation. Each upper secondary school has to evaluate the results and the quality of schooling with the participation of staff and students and publish the information publicly. The law also states that the MoE "shall collect, analyse and disseminate information on the operation of upper secondary schools as part of its regular external evaluation of the quality of schooling" (p. 14). External evaluation is to be conducted at least once every five years for each school and external evaluation reports are to be made public. However, no national standardised tests exist for upper secondary school level in Iceland.

As highlighted at the beginning of this section, the use of accountability mechanisms within the NPM trend is believed to improve schooling (Hooge et al., 2012); however, such mechanisms have also been described as controls which constrain the autonomy of school stakeholders (Simkins, 1997). As a result, in this thesis, the concept of accountability and its diverse forms and impacts is used to explore various stakeholders' perceptions of their autonomy in practice.

3.2.3 School autonomy and school choice

Another area of the conceptual framework concerns school choice. Part of the context of the policy on school autonomy at upper secondary level in Iceland is that students have the freedom to choose between schools, an initiative that was introduced more than a decade before the policy on school autonomy was established.

Polices on increasing school autonomy combined with school choice have been associated with the NPM trend in many countries (Teelken et al., 2005; Whitty & Power, 2001). The interaction of these two types of reforms has contributed to the creation of what has been termed 'quasi markets' in education (Whitty, 1997), where parents' and students' freedom of choice reflects the demand side and schools' competition for students the supply side (Waslander et al., 2010). Polices on using market mechanisms in education can differ significantly between countries; however "much public regulation is usually still retained, such as minimum length of schooling required for all, some monitoring of performance and certification of institutions" (Lauglo, 1995, p. 20). An example of a policy initiative aimed at increasing students' choice and competition between schools is the abolition of school catchment areas (Waslander et al., 2010) as was done in Iceland in 1996. Other initiatives have related to the financial operation of schools, including the idea of a 'voucher system' proposed by Milton Friedman (Friedman, 1963, as cited in Lauglo, 1995). This concept involves parents being given a voucher which they could use to pay for schooling in a school of their choice (Friedman & Friedman, 2002). In practice, this has more commonly been implemented "with public finance being more tied to enrolments", as is the case in Iceland, or, additionally, to the number of students who successfully complete their courses 'on time'" (Lauglo, 1995, p. 20).

The relationship between polices on school autonomy and those on school choice are not straightforward, and it has been used in arguments both for and against market mechanism in education (Musset, 2012). For example, some advocates believe that:

> school choice introduces competition of schools and forces them to improve their performance and their management, which will expand the supply of efficient and/or more innovative schools, since these schools are given the right to expand by attracting new students.
>
> (Hoxby, 2006, as cited in Musset, 2012, p. 6).

This argument assumes that parents and students will choose a school mainly due to the quality of education it provides; thus, market accountability "occurs when consumers choose between schools, with the bad schools presumably closing if the pupils leave." (Garn & Cobb, 2012, p. 4, as cited in Kirst, 1990, p. 9). However, this requires parents and students to have access to adequate information about each school's performance and study offers. There are also those who see parents' and students'

freedom to choose as a "basic human right" (Musset, 2012, p. 7) or as a tool to promote social justice by equalising students' opportunities (Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008, as cited in Musset, 2012). The latter argument is based on the belief that wealthier parents already have the option of choosing schools by moving into a different area or paying for private schooling. School choice polices would then allow more disadvantaged students "to access high quality schools they would otherwise not be able to attend" (Musset, 2012, p. 7). However, some critics believe that such policies achieve the opposite effect, arguing that:

> school choice can exacerbate inequities, as it increases sorting of students between schools based on their socio-economic status, their ethnicity and their ability, and quality can become increasingly unequal between schools. They argue that it further advantages those who already have had a better start in life because of their parents. They also suggest that school choice reduces the unique potential of schools as social cohesion builders, as schools are further segregated by student characteristics.
>
> (Musset, 2012, p. 4).

In this thesis, the concept of school choice and the different perspectives on market mechanisms in education will serve as a basis for better understanding stakeholders' perceptions of the enactment of policy on school autonomy. The next section explores the positions and relationships of key stakeholders, namely school leaders, teachers, parents, and students, in relation to the new autonomy policy.

3.3 Stakeholders' different positions

As set out above, this study explores the enactment of policy on school autonomy from the perspectives of different stakeholders within upper secondary schools. Hoogie and Helderman (2008) identify four categories of schools' stakeholders: parents and students, who are seen as the primary stakeholders; teachers and other staff, who are internal stakeholders with a direct interest in the success of the school; vertical stakeholders, including governments, municipalities, and other educational authorities; and horizontal stakeholders, who include other groups, individuals, or organisations in the environment with some interest in the school (Hooge et al., 2012; Hooge & Helderman, 2008).

The stakeholders included in this study are school leaders, including board members, teachers, parents and students. Each of these groups play different roles although these can also intersect, for example, school leaders can also be teachers. Teachers can also have leadership role, for example, as professional directors. Nevertheless, the ways in which school leaders and teachers perceive and respond to policy on school autonomy needs to be understood in the context of their different positions as internal

stakeholders within schools. Parents and students are the primary stakeholders, as they hold power over schools through their choice of schools and programmes. In the sections below, definitions and concepts related to school leadership, teachers' autonomy, and parents and students' choice will be discussed.

School leadership

The concept of school leadership can cover head teachers, assistant head teachers, leadership teams, school governing boards, and other staff working on leadership matters in schools (Pont et al., 2008). In this regard, it is seen as assuming a broad distribution of leadership to different persons within schools and not just to the head teacher. However, in Iceland, as "in many [OECD] countries there has been only one individual – the principal – holding a formal leadership position in schools." (Pont et al., 2008, p. 27). Head teachers in public upper secondary schools in Iceland are appointed by the minister of education for a period of five years, following an open advertisement and an assessment by the school board of the school in question. The head teacher is then responsible for hiring other school leaders and teachers as well as other staff in consultation with the school board (Upper Secondary Education Act No. 92/2008).

In this thesis, the concept of school leadership is associated with two sources of power: authority and influence (Bush, 2020; Connolly et al., 2019; Bush & Glover, 2014). These can be described as follows:

> Authority is legitimate power which is vested in leaders within formal organizations. Authority involves a legal right to make decisions which may be supported by sanctions. School heads and principals typically have substantial authority by virtue of their formal leadership positions. Influence represents an ability to affect outcomes and depends on personal characteristic and expertise. (Bush, 2020, p. 92).

Authority as the power to make decisions is generally linked to the management of an organisation, while influence is seen as one aspect of leadership. In line with the above, a distinction can be made between educational management and educational leadership. Various definition of these two concepts exist (Connolly et al., 2019; Pont et al., 2008; Bush & Glover, 2014, 2003; Day et al., 2000), including the following:

> Educational management in practice entails delegation, which involves being assigned, accepting and carrying the responsibility for the proper functioning of a system in which others participate in an educational institution, and implies an organisational hierarchy.
>
> Educational leadership in practice is the act of influencing others in educational settings to achieve goals and thus necessitates actions. Influencing others requires authority which may be derived from

> hierarchical relationships but may also come from other sources. When those carrying the responsibility for the functioning of an educational system act, those actions will influence others and they are therefore leadership actions. (Connolly et al., 2019, p. 505)

According to the above definitions, educational management is understood as delegated authority and responsibility, while educational leadership is more closely associated with influencing others to achieve goals within the schools. However, in general, these concepts are intertwined and the head teachers or school leaders role is a blend of leadership, management, and administrative tasks (Pont et al., 2008). In this study, policy on school autonomy is explored through school leaders' perceptions of both their educational management and leadership role and responsibility. School leaders include head teachers, school board members, assistant head teachers and curriculum managers, and, while their positions are different, they can all be seen as part of the management team within a school.

Teachers' autonomy

Teachers' autonomy is often discussed in terms of freedom versus constraints (Wermke & Salokangas, 2015; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014), notably in research on the relationship between teachers' professional autonomy and the implementation of accountability mechanisms attributed to the ideology of neoliberalism and NPM (Erss, 2018; Lundström, 2015; Ball, 2003). However, the concept of teachers' autonomy is complicated and can be understood from different aspects. Frostenson (2015), for example, makes a distinction between three types of teachers' autonomy: general professional autonomy, collegial professional autonomy, and individual autonomy. General professional autonomy refers to the mandate to influence "for example, [the] organisation of the school system, legislation, entry requirements, teacher education, curricula, procedures and ideologies of control" (p. 22). Collegial autonomy can be understood as "teachers' collective freedom to influence and decide on practice at the local level" (p. 23), and individual autonomy relates to "the individual's opportunity to influence the contents, frames and controls of the teaching practice" (p. 24). This study approaches the concept of teachers' autonomy using teachers' perceptions of their individual professional autonomy as a starting point; however, it does not neglect other notions of autonomy.

Students' choice

School choice is sometimes termed 'parental choice' in the literature. However, Hirsch (2002) has pointed out that this can be misleading as it "implies that students have no say in the matter" (p. 4). This has led some studies to use the term 'family' to reflect the collective nature of the choice, with, for example, the Eurydice report *Equity in school education in Europe* (2020), defining school choice as "the policies which allow families to make individual choices about which educational institution their child will

attend" (p. 86). In this thesis, however, students' choice and parents' choice are considered as two separate but closely interrelated concepts, as older students choosing upper secondary education in Iceland have more to say about their choice of school and study than younger ones, even if parental influence plays a significant role in their decision making.

The scope of school choice in different education systems can range from no choice to freedom to choose any school, at least in theory (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). However, the meaning of choice needs to be considered in terms of the degree of diversity of choice available both across and within schools. According to Glatter (1997), "diversity is essentially a policy concept", based on the assumption "that some form of diversity is desired by parents" (p. 9). Diversity of choice can take different forms (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020; Teelken et al., 2005; Hirsch, 2002; Glatter et al., 1997), but three distinct types are most relevant for this research: a) institutional diversity, which relates to "the different types of schools available [public or private], in terms of finance, foundation and governance" (Teelken et al., 2005, p. 37); b) educational diversity, which relates to different educational philosophies, schooling programmes or actual educational content" (p. 37); and c) individual curriculum choice, which relates to students having more control over their own learning path and depends, amongst other things, on there being a combination of compulsory and optional subjects within their study programmes (Hirsch, 2002). In this study, the concept of students' choice is understood in connection to the scope of students' choice of school, the range of study programmes on offer, and the choice of learning path within those study programmes.

3.4 Summary

This chapter has introduced the key concepts which form the conceptual framework for this study. The focus has been on establishing definitions and meanings of these concepts and tracing the relationships between them. In this research, education policy is understood both as a product and a process of policy making, with the concept of policy enactment used to explain how policies are interpreted and responded to in different school contexts. The concept of effect is also used to describe stakeholders' experience in relation to the policy change in Iceland, which, in this case, aimed to diversify the study offer to better meet students' aims and needs. Policy on school autonomy is understood as decentralisation of authority over decision making over curriculum development, recognising that this encompasses the planned curriculum, the enacted curriculum, and the experienced curriculum. The framework furthermore considers the relationship between policy on school autonomy, accountability, and school choice. Policy changes and meaning in practice are understood from the positions and perspectives of different stakeholders in schools, in this case school leaders, teachers, parents, and students. The next chapter provides a literature review based on the conceptual framework, with a particular focus on what is known about school stakeholders' different perspectives.

4 Literature review

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of relevant literature in order to increase understanding of the enactment of policies on increased autonomy in schools and to identify the gaps in knowledge which this study aims to address. The selection of literature was based on the conceptual framework for the research as introduced in the previous chapter. As this research is about policy at the upper secondary level, the review primarily considers research at that school level, and is divided into four sections as follows. The first two sections focus on how school leaders and teachers in a range of countries have experienced and responded to policy on school autonomy over curriculum development. In the third section, the emphasis is on how parents and students have perceived their choice under this form of decentralisation. The final section of the review concentrates on recent research on the upper secondary school level in Iceland which contributes to knowledge and understanding of the subject of this study within its national context. The chapter concludes by setting out the research questions and explaining how they were developed in line with the aims of the study and the literature review.

4.1 School leaders' autonomy

Increasing the autonomy of school leaders over decision making on important issues is believed to lead to better schoolwork and better student performance (Pont et al., 2008). This is in line with the argument put forward in support of policies on increased school autonomy: that those who work closest to students are in a better position to make decisions which serve students' needs (Hooge et al., 2012; Caldwell, 2008; Clune & White, 1988). However, it has also been recognised that policies towards increased school autonomy across different countries have led to school leaders' jobs becoming more demanding and complex (Pont, 2020; OECD, 2015; Pont et al., 2008). Therefore, the aim in this section is to look more closely at what is known about how school leaders in different national contexts have experienced policy initiatives on school autonomy.

Although policy reforms on school autonomy differ between countries, there is increasing evidence to suggest that school leaders do not always perceive their actual autonomy to be the same as that envisaged in formal policy, especially when additional accountability measures are also introduced (Gobby, 2013; Higham & Earley, 2013; Finnigan, 2007; Ascher & Greenberg, 2002). In England, for example, governmental education policy in 2010 encouraged schools to become academies. These schools are funded by the government but are independent of local authority control, enabling

them to have more autonomy over curriculum, budget and staffing (Department for Education, 2015). However, a study by Higham and Early (2013) found that many school leaders thought their scope to exercise this autonomy was limited by an increase in accountability controls and that "while a majority of school leaders viewed autonomy in general positively, they did not anticipate gaining further autonomy in practice" (p. 713). Drawing on Simkins' (1997) distinctions between criteria and operational power, the authors also discovered that while a majority of school leaders expected to gain more operational power related to the management of financial resources and how services are provided, most felt that criteria power over the "aims and purpose of schooling" (p. 713) remained with the central government.

In a similar vein, research by Finnigan (2007) on charter schools in the US found that school leaders perceived their scope to exercise autonomy as limited due to the accountability mechanisms, amongst other factors. Charter schools are different from traditional public schools in the US in the sense that they are supposed to "have more autonomy and flexibility" (p. 505), including "waivers of state laws, rules or regulations" (p. 510) to varying extents. However, although the schools in the study were found to be "most likely to have control over decisions related to curriculum, assessment and personnel" they were "least likely to have control over their own budget" (p. 514). In addition, in most states, charter schools are subject to the same accountability mechanisms as more traditional schools, including state-wide standardised tests, and findings showed that most school leaders felt that pressure to succeed in these assessments limited their autonomy, with some schools having to "discontinue other forms of assessment or alter their curricular programmes to improve performance" (p. 514). Overall findings from this research suggest that policy reform on school autonomy may not lead to the levels of autonomy envisaged in the policy documents (Finnigan, 2007).

There is also evidence which indicates that school leaders might also perceive their autonomy as limited to some extent due to a resulting increase in bureaucracy. For instance, Ascher and Greenberg (2002) draw attention to the impact of bureaucracy on the actual freedom of charter schools in different US states. They conclude that the "centralizing tendencies" of each state's "major educational bureaucracies" might be a better predictor of the actual scope for freedom in charter schools than what appears in the state's law on charter schools (p. 517). By contrast, in Western Australia, the Independent Public Schools (IPS) programme in 2009 aimed to remove bureaucratic constraints "by fostering school level decision-making, problem-solving and innovation" (Gobby, 2013, p. 19) and devolving the authority "to make a range of decisions related to creating a strategic direction for their school, allocating resources, and staffing" (p. 31) to principals. However, a case study of a high school within the programme revealed various tensions: while the principal saw increased flexibility as a benefit, she also experienced an increased "administrative burden", a shortage of support from a district office and a lack of finance to employ more staff. These factors were considered

to work "against the programme's goals of increasing principal freedom, innovation, leadership and improving student learning.", meaning that, in this case, efforts aimed at "facilitating autonomy and principals' innovating capacity" (p. 31) were seen as producing their own constraints.

The above findings suggest that research on school autonomy policy needs to consider the broader context, including possible limiting factors, to better understand how school leaders perceive their scope to respond to policy. Some researchers, notably Keddie (Keddie et al., 2020a; Holloway & Keddie, 2020; Keddie, 2016, 2014) have also drawn attention to the ways in which different school contexts and matters related to social justice affect how school leaders perceive their scope to utilise their autonomy for change. The following paragraphs present four research studies, one from England and three from Australia, which highlight how policies on school autonomy have created complex challenges in the work of school leaders, including in relation to what the education policy of their own schools should be.

Keddie's (2014) case study of a large and highly diverse English secondary school illustrates the ways in which local context affects how schools develop their own strategic responses to curriculum autonomy alongside "the performative demands of the audit culture" (p. 502). The school was a former comprehensive school which had converted to academy status in 2011, and the case study considered two possible strategic responses to increased curriculum autonomy. On one hand, school strategy might "be directed towards morally focused goals, that engage with a broad view of the purposes of schooling" (p. 514); on the other hand, the culture of audit and standards might lead to more delimited curriculum and pedagogy with a "focus on a narrow range of tested subjects" (p. 504) to get better results for students. In this case, local context, notably certain 'situated factors' (Braun et al., 2011, as cited in Keddie, 2014), including capable and well-supported students and "a history and reputation as an outstanding school" meant that the school did not have to change its "core beliefs or dynamics" (p. 515) to align with the current accountability mechanism. Indeed, these same situated factors, along with other contextual factors, were considered to have supported the school's "confident and 'morally' focused take up" of the academisation policy (p. 502), and contributed to the prioritisation of social learning within the school "in response to the diversity of its student cohort" (p. 515).

Another case study conducted by Keddie (2016) in two public high schools in Queensland, Australia, explored the impact of the IPS policy on equity and diversity, which was introduced in 2013, on schools with diverse student populations. School leaders generally viewed the conversion to independent status as positive, "allowing the schools greater control, flexibility and efficiency in terms of governance, and as fostering higher levels of responsiveness to their local community" (p. 718). However, external accountability parameters were seen as restraining their autonomy and influencing how they responded to this policy reform. Findings revealed concern

among participants that the IPS programme might impact the distribution of resources to meet the needs of disadvantaged students and that structural inequity might increase, for example, due to the schools' admission policies. The study also notes that, when schools experience pressure to compete because of external performance measurements in certain subjects, then "it is more than likely that they will narrow their curriculum and pedagogy to focus on these areas" (p. 723). In conclusion, the study highlights the key role played by school leadership "in shaping how autonomy is taken up [...] and its capacity to shape equity and public purpose priorities" (p. 724).

In a more recent study across four states in Australia, Keddie et al. (2020a) explored how policy on school autonomy was understood and enacted in public schools and its implications for social justice. Data were obtained through interviews with stakeholders from educational bureaucracies, politics, parent organisations, principal associations, professional organisations, teaching unions, and with principals and academics. The findings revealed that most stakeholders were positive about the "idea of greater school autonomy" (p. 436), citing benefits such as the flexibility to adapt provision to accommodate students, particularly those with additional needs, to meet community needs, and to manage curriculum, pedagogy and resources. However, there were also concerns regarding increased workload and stress among school leaders. Findings also revealed anxiety among stakeholders about the influence of market forces on public education and the "negative impacts of competition and rigid external accountabilities" (p. 437). Examples of such impacts included the use of public information about schools to identify a "hierarchy of winners and losers" and how "social segregation where schools become residualised" was believed to have increased (p. 437). Findings also revealed challenges related to schools' different sizes and locations, notably issues related to economic of scale and the limited scope for smaller schools to offer the same breadth of courses as larger schools, despite the fact that not doing so meant they risked losing their "top kids" (p. 440). Holloway and Keddie (2020) also raise the issue of the relationship between greater school autonomy and stratification and hierarchy in the school system. Interviews with school leaders from 12 schools across three Australian states revealed that they saw being able to "target their school programme and resources towards the diverse needs of their students and communities" (p. 791) as one of the greatest benefits of their freedom. As such school autonomy was seen as way to develop "socially just schools." (p. 794). However, some school leaders also referred to "the dilemmas produced by school autonomy" which related to "competition between schools and in turn increased stratification and residualisation in the system" (p. 794). This can be exacerbated by a popular school "taking the 'best' students" (p. 795) while neighbouring schools struggle to recruit students and staff "and attain the academic results requisite to their survival" (p. 794).

These studies highlight school leaders' concerns regarding the consequences of competition between schools in relation to policies on school autonomy. However, Urbanovič et al. (2019) investigated collaboration and competition in relation to school

autonomy reform and found that competition can differ between schools. The participants were principals from primary and secondary schools in Lithuania. The study showed how patterns of collaboration and competition varied according to the different school contexts. For example, schools were more likely to collaborate with schools located at a distance but to compete with those closer to them. Also, schools tended to collaborate with similar schools, unless they were competing for the same students. However, the authors highlight that "the competence of the school principal and the community initiative", to a large extent, determined how school autonomy was used to develop collaboration or to "gain a competitive advantage" (Urbanovič et al., 2019, p. 194). In addition, Holm and Lundström (2011) explored head teachers' views on increased school competition and its impact on their work and school organisation. The head teachers were from eight different schools in five municipalities in Sweden. Participants argued that "competition increases the staff's efforts and improves school development." However, it was also seen as leading to "increased stress and uncertainty" for some because of "workload and concerns for the school's survival" (p. 601). Head teachers' experiences were found to differ due to 'local conditions', such as "geographic location or which programmes the competitors are running" (p. 606). For example, in schools where student numbers were decreasing, the concern was about survival and uncertainty over teachers' jobs. By contrast, in schools where numbers were rising, the concerns seemed to be about how to "attract the 'right' kind of students and achieving high admission scores" (p. 606). Several head teachers expressed uncertainty related to "which strategies are the most successful to reach potential students and which aspects ultimately determine their choices." (p. 610). While offering a broad range of academic and vocational study programmes was thought to "promote diversity and attract a 'mix' of students", there was a belief that it may be more financially beneficial for a school "to clarify its profile and invest in a few prestigious programmes" (p. 610). Holm and Lundström (2011) concluded that head teachers' roles have changed "from a pedagogical role to a more economic and (customer-) service-oriented one" (p. 613).

The literature exploring how school leaders experience polices on school autonomy suggests that some of their challenges relate to the competitive environment which these policy initiatives often motivate. Despite some difference in school leaders' experience between countries, the common thread which brings their experiences together relates to the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), where school autonomy has been combined with school choice and accountability (Evers & Kneyber, 2016). However, as Holm and Lundström (2011) argue, "the way school leaders shape their roles and how they are influenced by marketisation and school choice policies is scarcely examined" (p. 601). This was true at the time of their research, and a more recent OECD report (OECD, 2018b) also highlighted the fact that policies on school autonomy and their implications for school leaders' work are still considered an under-researched area. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how Iceland's policy

on school autonomy has affected school leaders, teachers, students, and parents. The next section examines the literature on teachers' autonomy which is considered to be of relevance to this research.

4.2 Teachers' autonomy

Teachers' autonomy has been described as a "precondition for the exercise of teachers' professional expertise" (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007, p. 206), and it is considered to have numerous positive aspects. Research has shown that teachers' perceptions of autonomy are associated with job satisfaction, positive working environments, empowerment, and perceived self-efficacy (Parker, 2015; Wilches, 2007), while perceived lack of autonomy has been linked to burnout and staff turnover (Parker, 2015; Wilches, 2007). For Cribb and Gewirtz (2007), this indicates "that what is good for teachers is good for learning,"; however, they also point out that teachers' autonomy can be good for them "in its own right as well." (p. 206). In addition, the policy trend towards increased school autonomy has frequently been supported by reference to the positive effects of teachers' autonomy (Salokangas and Wermke 2020); however, arguments for more state control and limits on teachers' autonomy also exist. These have been drawn together under four headings: "protecting learners from harm, ensuring equal access, the personal costs of autonomy, and commonality and cohesion" (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007, p. 207). The following section explores selected literature to establish what is known about how teachers in different context have perceived policy initiatives on autonomy over curriculum development and the benefits and limitations associated with them.

To begin with, there is evidence in the literature that teachers' actual scope for autonomy may be less than that intended by formal policy. A study by Erss et al. (2016) on upper secondary school teachers' perceptions in Germany, Estonia, and Finland found noticeable differences between the rhetoric and how teachers experienced autonomy in reality. For example, despite changes introduced in 2008 which used "autonomy stressing rhetoric", teachers in German schools did not find that their actual freedom to interpret the curriculum, "according to their own views and the needs of students" (p. 593) increased. This was linked to an earlier reform in 2004 which shortened the schooling period by one year without "reducing curriculum content" (p. 593), meaning teachers experienced increased time and workload pressures. In Estonia, the curriculum for upper secondary schools in 1996 described teachers as both curriculum makers and education policy makers; however, the subject syllabi were highly prescriptive, with little scope for teachers' autonomy, and this led to teachers feeling that their expertise was being ignored. By contrast, Finnish teachers felt they had more autonomy "over the choice of content" than teachers in Estonia and Germany as their national curriculum guide was less prescriptive in certain subjects, such as foreign languages. However, teachers in all three countries reported that high-stakes standardised tests limited their autonomy, as their primary task became to prepare

students for the tests, which resulted in narrower curricula. This study indicates that research on policy on school autonomy needs to consider each country's particular context and that teachers might perceive their autonomy as restrained by different policy initiatives and accountability control, even if the rhetoric suggests otherwise.

Research also indicates that teachers might perceive their autonomy differently across different aspects of the curriculum. For example, a study by Salokangas et al. (2020) which explored the perceptions of teachers in Ireland and Finland found that both felt they had considerable autonomy over "how they teach and what teaching material they use" (p. 336); however, differences emerged with respect to how these teachers perceived pressure from formal controls on their work. Finnish teachers saw themselves as free from formal control while Irish teachers experienced "varying intensifying pressures" (p. 341), due, in part, to unannounced classroom visits as part of whole school evaluations and high-stakes exams. Irish teachers also reported that school leaders were more involved in educational, social, and development issues (Salokangas et al., 2020). In addition, research with Canadian and Finnish mathematics teachers in upper secondary schools suggests that the way they perceive their professional autonomy is, to some extent, associated with culture in context (Paradis et al., 2017). Both Canadian and Finnish teachers experienced their autonomy most in areas of classroom operation and least over the mathematics curriculum, and high-stakes examinations were an issue in both contexts. However, a difference was found regarding how satisfied these teachers were with their autonomy. Canadian teachers perceived their autonomy as variable and declining, and this led to feelings of dissatisfaction, with the administration of the schools and the culture of monitoring highlighted as the main reasons for declining autonomy. However, despite the need to teach to the matriculation examination, Finnish teachers experienced greater autonomy and were more satisfied than their Canadian counterparts, due in part to the absence of a similar monitoring culture. Differences in the teachers' perceptions between countries also seemed to relate to differences in the ways in which they were perceived within their own national contexts. While the Canadian context was described as being characterised by accountability and distrust, the culture in Finland was seen as respectful and trusting of teachers (Paradis et al., 2017). This study demonstrates that teachers' experiences of autonomy vary across the curriculum, with more freedom to determine how they approach teaching but less over areas such as curriculum content. And, as in Erss et al. (2016), the impact of pressure from external controls on curriculum autonomy is particularly prominent.

Although numerous studies have highlighted positive aspects of teachers' autonomy (e.g. Parker, 2015; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Wilches, 2007), other research indicates different experiences among teachers. For instance, a research project in four European countries, Finland, Ireland, Germany, and Sweden, revealed a paradox between the general belief that teachers want more autonomy and the fact that it can have a negative impact on their work (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). In each country,

teachers perceived their increased decision-making capacity as leading to more complexity and risk to their jobs, leading the authors to conclude that increased autonomy can lead to "anxiety, frustration, self-restriction, and the eventual rejection of autonomy among teachers" (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021, p. 2). In a similar vein, research conducted in 2011 in South Korea with 12 high school teachers found a gap between their expectations of autonomy and the reality they experienced (Hong & Youngs, 2016). The study examined the implementation of the new national curriculum guide in 2009, which aimed to motivate schools to "develop varied curricula according to local conditions" and "reduce students' burden of learning" (p. 23). However, although a nation-wide survey had previously indicated that a majority of high school teachers wanted more autonomy over the curriculum, the authors found "that the participating teachers did not welcome the enhanced curricular autonomy, nor did they believe it would diversify the school curriculum" (p. 20). Several causes were believed to explain these contradictory views, one of which was a "gap between the desired and the granted autonomy" (p. 20). While the national curriculum guide had given schools the autonomy to decide which subjects to offer, teacher still had to follow externally mandated content standards for those subjects. The guide was also believed to have had a negative impact on teachers' job security, a view which was especially prominent among teachers who did not teach core subjects. Their concerns were that schools would utilise their autonomy to focus on subjects which carried more weight in college admissions processes, leading to a narrower rather than a more diversified high school curriculum (Hong & Youngs, 2016).

Several studies also indicate that increased school autonomy over curriculum together with outcome-based learning have made teachers' work more complicated. Research by Pristley et al. (2014) in the Scottish context suggests that whether and how schools utilise curriculum autonomy to innovate can create tensions among teachers due to conflicting policies and cultures within schools and a lack of implementation skills. The authors examined the implementation of The Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland, issued in 2004, which emphasised teachers as agents of change and shifted education focus away from being primarily knowledge based to being developed around key competencies. It also aimed to increase student choice by giving schools more flexibility in designing and developing pathways and programmes (*Education Scotland*, 2023). The study shows how two similar schools utilised this scope to innovate to different extents, influenced by the culture within the respective schools and the way this affected teachers' ability "to make sense of often complex and confusing curriculum policy" and "the articulation of a clear vision about what such [a] policy means for education within each school" (p. 189). Findings were similar in two studies in Estonia (Kärner et al., 2013; Kuiper & Berkvens, 2013), where a new national curriculum guide for upper secondary schools was issued in 2011. According to Kärner et al. (2013), this permitted a certain "amount of freedom for schools and teachers to act in accordance with the needs and interests of their students and the community" (p.

35); however, Kuiper and Berkvens (2013) found that a number of problems arose due to "a lack of knowledge and skills in implementing innovation, tensions between outcomes-based syllabi, teachers preferring to teach according to textbooks, and external assessment" (p. 35).

Part of the way the introduction of school autonomy affects teachers' working contexts is the competitive environment which often follows, as policies on school autonomy in different countries have, to varying degrees, been combined with market mechanisms. A study in the Swedish context (Lundström & Holm, 2011) found that upper secondary school reforms in recent decades had been characterised by decentralisation, competition, and accountability mechanisms, with resources allocated to municipalities, voucher systems introduced, and "favourable terms" created for independent schools (p. 194). Findings showed that teachers' views of these reforms varied; however, in general, they saw changes in their professional role, notably in relation to them taking part in the marketing of the schools and a greater focus on keeping students in school. This environment led to teachers experiencing increased workload, more stress, less job security, and, in some cases, "performing [in a way] that is not consistent with one's professional belief" (p. 199). In addition, findings from Lundström (2015) suggest that recent school reforms in Sweden have actually reduced teachers' autonomy. The study examined interviews with 119 teachers conducted in three separate studies between 2002 and 2014 and concluded that, despite that not being the aim of any individual policy, the reforms had collectively moved power away from teachers "to the state, municipalities, principals and the school market, including customers, that is students." (p. 73). This related to various factors, including an increase in audit culture and its effects on teaching and how, in a market environment, the focus moves to satisfying the 'customer'. In this respect, the findings also revealed tensions among teachers between the obligations they felt to meet students' wishes and what they believed was best for those students. Similar research in the Australian context (Keddie et al., 2011) also sheds light on how high accountability, competition, and performative cultures have led to teachers feeling that their professionalism and autonomy has been undermined. Drawing on interview data from a large government school, the study shows how the school's strong focus on outstanding academic results was believed to have led to narrower pedagogy and curriculum and "side-line[d] important social and equity concerns" (p. 89). The findings also indicate that teachers experienced the working environment in the school as restrictive and demanding, thereby creating additional pressure and anxiety.

The above studies reveal how policies on school autonomy have created challenges in teachers' working contexts. Despite some commonality, there is a difference between the ways in which teachers in different countries have perceived their autonomy under such initiatives, often linked to national accountability mechanisms. This indicates the need to study policy on increased school autonomy within each country's educational context. Having considered the impact of autonomy on teachers, the next section examines literature on students' and parents' choice.

4.3 Students' and parents' choice

The aim of the policy on school autonomy over curriculum at upper secondary level in Iceland was, amongst other things, to increase the diversity of the study offer and enable students to make choices in line with their different aims and needs. This section therefore highlights literature that explores the ways in which students' freedom to choose operates in the context of school autonomy over curriculum development in a range of countries.

The relationship between students' freedom to choose and schools' autonomy over curriculum has been described as 'quasi market' (Lund, 2008). Lund's study of students' choice of school and study in Sweden describes how a "local quasi-market of upper secondary education" (p. 633) has led to changes in the relationship between students and schools. In the former centralised system, "the state took a great responsibility for educational outcomes in terms of [the] relationship between upper secondary education, higher education and [the] labour market." However, much of this responsibility has now shifted to students, obliging schools to "inform, illustrate and market their educational options" to prospective students and their families. This, Lund argues, has made the education system more "discursive", as each student now needs someone to "discuss different educational choices with," leaving those who do not have the option of this type of discussion "at a disadvantage" (Lund, 2008, p. 646). In addition, Waslander et al.'s (2010) review of literature on market mechanisms in education highlights how the increased complexity in programme choices means there is "a greater risk of parents not being informed adequately" (p. 66). This is an issue because research suggests that "parents act differently when such information is available, and that information can overcome market failure" (p. 37). Furthermore, a study by Foskett et al. (2008) in England found that students wanted information about study options earlier in the choice process and more real experience of their post-16 choices. Students also emphasised the need for "more impartial information, advice, guidance and support" (p. 15); however, they found large amounts of information confusing, especially as "the qualification frameworks, new subjects, and the wide range of vocational courses" were largely unfamiliar (p. 15). As these studies indicate, the provision of sufficient information to students and their parents plays a key role in enabling the market in education to function effectively. As such it can be assumed that when students are able to make informed judgements about their study options, they are more likely to make choices in line with their individual aims and needs.

However, research also suggests that students' decision making is not always a simple case of matching aims and needs with the options on offer. Rodeiro (2007) collected data from a large number of students in England to better understand their choice of

subjects at AS/A level[9] and found that, although curriculum reform in 2000 had aimed to broaden these students' choices, most "tended to follow the traditional gender stereotypes for the subjects" (p. 5). In addition, while "the uptake of traditional academic subjects increased with attainment; this trend was reversed for the newer/vocational subjects" (p. 5). Other key findings related to how students perceived the importance of the subjects, their usefulness for future careers, what the students were interested in, and how they perceived their own abilities; however, in some cases, students' choice was dictated by the choice of subjects on offer rather than by what they preferred. Cuff (2017) explored in particular whether students' and teachers' perceptions of subject difficulty might impact students' choice, and interviews were conducted with teachers and students in 12 schools across England. The students who participated in the study were at GCSE[10] or A level and, as such, discussed choices they were either about to make or had already made. Findings show that students' perceptions of difficulty did influence their choice; however, it was not the main basis for their decisions, and they focused more on enjoyment and the usefulness of subjects. Nevertheless, students noted that they were sometimes advised by teachers, parents, and friends not to take subjects considered too difficult for them.

Another aspect of students' choice is the relationship between their needs and those of the economy, notably in the choice of STEM[11] subjects. Tripney et al.'s (2010) review of literature on the STEM subject choices of young people (aged 14-19) identified a link between gender, ability and students' choice in this regard, with evidence suggesting that boys are more likely to choose sciences than girls, and students with higher grades are more likely to continue in science and mathematics. Students' choice between academic study and vocational education and training (VET) has also been explored. For example, Sych's (2016) literature review highlights how, historically, higher social and educational value has been accorded to academic study, creating a hierarchy of education with "academics on the top and vocations on the bottom" (p. 48). The review further reveals that, despite positive efforts to promote VET "there still remains an undercurrent of negative discourse" (p. 44). It is perhaps unsurprising then that various studies have shown that students from families with stronger educational backgrounds and higher earnings are more likely to enrol in academic programmes, while students from families with vocational backgrounds are more likely to choose the vocational track (Sych, 2016; Triventi et al., 2016; Brunello & Checchi, 2007). In addition, according to

[9] AS refers to 'Advanced Subsidiary' and A refers to 'Advanced' level qualifications, subject-based qualifications that students in the British education system typically take to access university or certain professions (See https://www.studying-in-uk.org/a-levels-in-uk/ Accessed 23. July 2021).

[10] General Certificate of Secondary Education, the main qualifications taken by students at school-leaving age.

[11] Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

a study on the academic and vocational divide conducted in Finland, Iceland, and Sweden, the focus on different skills and knowledge seems to have limited VET students' access to higher education (Nylund et al., 2018). Overall, these studies highlight some characteristics of the demand side in the education market and demonstrate that students' choice of study at upper secondary level can be influenced by various factors, not just their interest in a specific subject.

Students' choice in the education market also depends on what is offered to them on the supply side. One aspect of this relates to the accessibility of educational options within the students' geographic context (Prieto et al., 2019). For instance, Teelken et al. (2005) used comparative case studies of secondary schools in England, Scotland, and the Netherlands to investigate the disparity between formal education policy and actual school choice. Findings suggest that while the option to exercise school choice was offered "in a formal sense" in each case study school, in some cases, it was "not particularly encouraged" (p. 35). This was due to "factors such as availability of transport and information; bureaucratic procedures; strictly enforced admission criteria; and lack of educational diversity" (p. 35). In a different context, Fjellman et al. (2019) explored the spatial restructuring of the Swedish upper secondary market from 1997 to 2011 following policy reform on school choice. The school choice mechanism was part of wider reform on decentralisation in education and meant that students could "choose and attend schools (public or private) based on preference rather than residential area" (p. 518). The study revealed a pattern of students commuting to urban areas and, as a result, a decline in the educational offer outside those urban zones. This trend was found to limit choice for many students, going against the policy intentions, which were, amongst other things, to promote equal educational opportunities. The authors concluded that this was due to market failure "creating differences in educational opportunities between places" (p. 518). Bell (2009) also investigated how geography affected parents' choice, looking at middle and high schools in Detroit, USA. Findings were in line with results from other studies which "suggest that parents prefer schools close to their homes" (p. 497); however, the study also revealed how geographic preferences vary between families and interact with "other preferences and [the] existing supply of schools" (p. 493). Examples of other preferences included whether a school could meet students' "personal and academic needs" and "the quality of information and strength of beliefs parents had about schools and neighbourhoods" (p. 518). In addition, Taylor (2002) examined the geography of choice in secondary education in urban and rural contexts in England and Wales and found that parents experienced "geographical and material reasons" as the main constraints on their choice (p. 248). 'Material reasons' related to level of education and income, and the social advantages gained by those who could afford to use costly transport arrangements to overcome geographical constraints of distance, especially in rural areas (Taylor, 2002). To conclude, the above research sheds light on how differences

in geographical and demographic contexts can impact the function of school choice polices when combined with decentralisation in education.

Despite various studies on students' choice, such as those discussed here, it has been argued that the relationship between students' choice and policy on school autonomy over curriculum remains under researched. Hamilton and Guin (2005) suggest, amongst others, that the following question should be addressed: "How is parental choice influenced by the supply of schools, and how do parental preferences affect supply?" (p. 52). They conclude from a literature review that "much of the existing research fail[s] to consider the interplay between demand and supply" and how student's choice is "constrained by the options available to them" (p. 53).

Having examined the effects of greater autonomy over curriculum within international contexts, the next section focuses on research from Iceland, the site of this study.

4.4 Research in the Icelandic context

Various studies have been conducted on the upper secondary level in Iceland in recent years. In particular, an extensive research project, *Upper secondary school practices in Iceland: Teaching and learning – students' engagement and initiative*,[12] was conducted from 2012 to 2018 with the aim of shedding light on practices in upper secondary schools and the background and forces shaping them. Different types of data were collected through school visits, classrooms observations, and interviews with school leaders, teachers, and students from nine upper secondary schools across the country in 2013 and 2014, and various articles have been published which build on them (Óskarsdóttir, 2018). Some of these are discussed here, along with other research; however, despite this growing body of research, "some educational fields are still weakly represented in the evidence spectrum, such as vocational studies" (Ragnarsdóttir et al., 2020, p. 43).

There is some evidence to suggest that teachers and school leaders were rather positive towards increased school autonomy at the beginning, although there were some mixed feelings about its influence on working conditions. For example, Reynisdóttir and Johannesson (2013) found that, despite rather positive views of the policy, the teachers they interviewed claimed it was unclear how to incorporate the new curriculum into daily schoolwork. The teachers also expressed mixed views concerning the need for such changes, with some ready to deal with radical change while others saw no reason

[12] The research project was hosted by the Laboratory on School Development, School of Education, University of Iceland:
https://menntavisindastofnun.hi.is/sites/menntavisindastofnun.hi.is/files/documents/2020-07/starfsh_frhsk_skyrsla_19.2.2016.pdf

for it. School leaders who participated in Axelsdóttir's (2014) study explained that resistance among teachers was mostly linked to dissatisfaction with their wages, and most of them experienced the curriculum as an opportunity to make changes in schools. The fact that the financial crisis of 2008 affected teachers' working conditions may also have contributed to some teachers' negative thoughts, with increased workload and stress together with fewer opportunities to serve students' educational needs (Ragnarsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014).

There is also research which suggest that schools' local contexts impact how they have experienced policy changes in recent years and how they have responded to them. Bergsdóttir and Magnúsdóttir (2018) studied changes in the working condition of teachers and school leaders in four upper secondary schools in Iceland over a twenty-year period. Interviews were conducted in 2017-2018 with teachers and school leaders who had been working in their schools for more than two decades. The chosen schools differed with regards to the number of students who applied for their academic study programmes and their subsequent rejection rates, and findings revealed differences in how the participating staff experienced changes in the education system depending on whether they came from schools with high or low rejection rates. For example, schools with higher rates felt fewer effects when students became entitled to study at upper secondary level until the age of 18; however, meeting the requirement to shorten the study time for matriculation from four years to three had a much greater influence (Bergsdóttir and Magnúsdóttir, 2018). Different cultures and attitudes within schools are also believed to explain differences in how they respond to changes. This was highlighted in Ragnarsdóttir's (2018a) study of school leaders' and teachers' views of the changes following the introduction of the new upper secondary education act in 2008 and the new national curriculum guide in 2011. While most of their responses could be classified as responses to "macro demand for change," using Coburns' (2004) categories: rejection, decoupling, parallel structure, assimilation and accommodation, analysis of the data led to the creation of an additional category termed "pioneering." Ragnarsdóttir notes how understanding different views and dynamics within schools can support school leaders, teachers and education authorities to "become more competent to facilitate intended change and overcome the diverse obstacles they face in their everyday work" (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018a, p. 17).

Further research by Ragnarsdóttir (2018b)[13] on how school leaders perceive their roles when leading change at the upper secondary level also indicates influence from other institutions on how schools work. Data was collected via interviews with 21 school leaders in nine upper secondary schools in 2013 and 2014, and analysis revealed that

[13] Ragnarsdóttir's doctoral thesis was part of the research project *Upper Secondary school Practices in Iceland: Teaching and Learning – Students' Engagement and Initiative*.

school leaders experienced "complex patterns of interaction between numerous actors and diverse social structures influencing change in upper secondary education in Iceland." (p. 221). The most powerful actors were believed to be the MoE, "the Teachers' Union, and the universities, mainly the University of Iceland" (p. 221). Findings from Ragnarsdóttir and Jónasson (2020) illustrate more specifically how the university level, mainly the University of Iceland, impacts development in upper secondary schools. This relates, amongst other things, to the entrance criteria set for different programmes, as these "indicate what is important to study in upper secondary school in order to do well when attending university" (p. 202). In this regard, school leaders experience a shortage of "authority and agency to promote change in the content of powerful high-status academic subjects" (Ragnarsdóttir & Jónasson, 2020, p. 205). This is in line with Ragnarsdóttir (2018b), who found that school leaders experienced their greatest challenges in relation to curriculum content, as they had "limited power to promote content change even when they felt strongly that a change was needed" (p. 221). This was explained by resistance among "faculty members of traditional academic subjects, in particular mathematics" (p. 222).

As Ragnarsdóttir et al. (2020) suggest, less is known about how school leaders and teachers have perceived their scope for change in vocational study in the Icelandic context. However, several studies shed light on the different challenges involved in utilising autonomy to make changes in vocational study in schools. Findings from research by Eiríksdóttir et al. (2018) suggest that the different status of vocational and academic programmes in upper secondary education in Iceland plays a role. Although core academic subjects are discussed in the Upper Secondary Education Act (2008) and the National Curriculum Guide (2011), these documents are "silent about individual vocational subjects" (p. 20), and this hierarchy is reflected in school admission requirements. Higher grades are needed in general for the academic study path than for vocational study, and "entry requirements are almost exclusively based on academic competences and traditions" (p. 20). Eiríksdóttir (2017) also examined the dual system of VET in Iceland, which involves part of the study taking place in school and part at a workplace. The study identified a lack of defined responsibility for coordination, meaning "this dual system is to large extent operated like two parallel system of study and insufficient attention is paid to the study forming a coherent whole" (p. 43). However, in 2021, the minister of education issued a new regulation on workplace study which made upper secondary schools responsible for students' progress in vocational study, from the beginning until the completion of their study, including the workplace element. This made schools responsible for drawing up workplace contracts and ensuring that students could get workplace training (Regulation 180/2021), and this should help to address the structural issues Eiríksdóttir (2017) identified.

In contrast to academic study programmes for matriculation, there are standardised tests for certified trades which students need to finish before getting their professional

qualifications, notably the journeyman's examinations. Guðmundsdóttir and Eiríksdóttir (2020) investigated this examination "in its capacity as a legal and social recognition of professional skill and a final assessment of vocational studies" (p. 15). Four certified trades were selected for the study and interviews conducted in 2014 and 2015 with recently graduated journeymen, teachers at upper secondary schools, and master craftsmen in charge of apprentices at workplaces. Findings showed that participants felt the exam often failed to evaluate the workplace elements effectively, and that, in three out of four certified trades, the last term in school was typically used to prepare students for the assessment, with some students opting to take specific courses to prepare themselves if this was not done in their schools (Guðmundsdóttir & Eiríksdóttir, 2020). This indicates that teachers view it as part of their responsibility to prepare students for this final assessment, and suggests that schools might be reluctant to make changes in their certified trades programmes unless they lead to improved performance in the exam. Another possible influencing factors was found by Stefánsdóttir (2018) who studied whether and how two comprehensive schools used policy on school autonomy to innovate or change the study offer for vocational programmes. Interviews were conducted in 2017 with head teachers and heads of faculties for vocational study. Findings revealed that school leaders experienced more difficulties in coming up with new vocational study programmes than new academic study programmes, due, in part, to the long and complex process for getting the study programmes approved by the MoE and the time required "to get the study programmes through the occupational councils" (p. 59).

These studies shed light on various challenges in the context of upper secondary schools in Iceland during a period when schools were at an early stage in the process of implementing the new upper secondary education act (2008) and the new national curriculum guide (2011). However, less seems to be known about how schools used their autonomy to change their study offer and course content to better meet students' different aims and needs. It can be assumed, however, that knowledge about students' interests is an important prerequisite for schools to be able to respond to their wishes, and several studies exist in Iceland which provide insights into what students believe matters for their choice of study and school.

The research programme *Ungt fólk* (Youth in Iceland)[14] is based on regular surveys of all students at elementary and upper secondary level in Iceland. Findings for the upper secondary level in 2020 indicates that students' chief considerations when choosing a school are whether they think it will help them progress to further study and how well it prepares them for work after graduation. This is followed by the facilities at the school

[14] The Icelandic Centre for Social Research & Analysis has studied various aspects of students' wellbeing, health, and study since the late 1990s.

and the extra-curricular activities, with influence from family and friends regarded as least significant (Guðmundsdóttir et al., 2020). However, research by Magnúsdóttir and Garðarsdóttir (2018) suggests that other factors may also be at play. They drew on Bourdieu's theories to investigate how academic students perceived their choice of upper secondary school in the Reykjavík area. 19 students from four upper secondary schools were interviewed in 2017, and it became "clear from participants' words that school choice is an important means for shaping identity and differentiation" (p. 1). For example, pressure from family was found to be a more significant factor for students from families with deeply rooted educational backgrounds.

In addition, analysis of data from the survey *Ungt fólk* conducted in 2018 shows a difference between the programmes students would like to study and those they actually chose. Findings showed that a majority of students (70%) reported that they would like more free selection in their study programmes, with almost two thirds interested in taking more practical courses and about 40% interested in taking more art courses. Perhaps most significantly, while almost half of the students interviewed considered that practical subjects were more suitable for them than academic study, the majority described their programme as 'academic study for matriculation' (Sigbjörnsson, 2020; Guðmundsdóttir et al., 2019). This echoes findings by Svavarsdóttir (2010) who studied students' choice of study plan in the last year of elementary school. Although about 50% of students reported they liked practical study better, over 70% of them planned to apply for academic study programmes. Furthermore, students who were uncertain about their choice were also more likely to apply for academic programmes (Svavarsdóttir, 2010). In this regard, researchers have highlighted the relationship between students' uncertainty and their subsequent engagement in their studies. For example, Blöndal and Ægisdóttir (2013) found that:

> The more uncertain students were about their choice of study, the more negative academic behaviour they showed, the less they identified with school and the less ambitious they were and future goals less clear. (Blöndal & Ægisdóttir, 2013, p. 1).

Based on their findings, they stressed the importance of supporting students when choosing study and ensuring that their choices are aligned with their interests, as students who are interested and engaged in their studies are less likely to drop out of school.

These studies explored the choice of school and study from the students' perspectives. However, there is also study in the Icelandic context which draws attention to the way the supply of study programmes can also influence students' choices. Þorkelsson (2011) investigated students' options when they start upper secondary school, using data from Statistics Iceland and the MoE, amongst other sources, and concluded that, although "the discussion about upper secondary schools in Iceland has [for decades] mainly revolved around the need to offer more diverse and better study options for students"

(p. 1), the options available for students are fewer than might be expected. The findings showed that the majority of students apply for a school that is close to their homes, or within their local area, and this limits the choice of students in rural areas, as schools in the countryside tend to be very small with limited scope to offer diverse study programmes. In addition, students with low grades from elementary school often have less choice than those with higher grades. For example, just 30% of students in Reykjavík applied to the four upper secondary schools which use grade-based selection, as these schools are not a realistic option for students with lower grades so they do not try to apply. The study also revealed that not all schools offer study programmes for disabled students or for students who need foundation courses before starting study programmes for matriculation. Þorkelsson also highlights how according to the reference timetable for elementary schools, about 75% of students' time is dedicated to academic study, with just 15% spent on art and craft and 10% on school electives (MoE, 2011b, as cited in Þorkelsson, 2011), meaning students are far more accustomed to academic rather than vocational study. As a result of these factors, the author concluded that it is "mainly students in the capital area who finish elementary school with high grades" who can exercise real choice (p. 9). The study also shows how geographical and demographic conditions can impact both the function of students' choice and policy on school autonomy over curriculum. However, in the case of Iceland, a small country with many sparsely populated areas, it is difficult to adapt the supply of study to meet students' demands.

4.5 Research questions

The aim of this section is to introduce the research questions which guide this study and provide an overview of how they were developed in line with the aim of the study and the literature review. As explained in Chapter One, the overarching aim of the research is to increase understanding of how policy on school autonomy over curriculum development at upper secondary level in Iceland has been understood and enacted by school stakeholders and what they believe it has accomplished.

The conceptual framework developed in Chapter Three provides definitions of key concepts such as 'school autonomy', 'accountability' and 'school choice', and associated areas, and identifies school autonomy over curriculum development as a particular form of education policy. The literature reviewed in this chapter explores policy reforms on school autonomy across a number of countries and the varying accountability mechanisms which accompany them, showing how they have invariably created competitive environments in which schools compete for students. The literature review further demonstrates the significance of the cultural context in each country, underlining the importance of studying the enactment of policy on school autonomy in its national context, in this case Iceland.

The concept of policy enactment (Ball et al., 2012) to explain how polices are interpreted and responded to by actors in different school contexts emerged as a key feature of the conceptual framework and provides a basis for the research approach. The literature reviewed here shows how the enactment of policy on school autonomy over the curriculum can have different meanings and consequences for different school stakeholders, indicating that the topic needs to be examined and understood from different perspectives. However, much of the research has tended to view school autonomy mainly from the educational staff perspective. Therefore, and in line with the aim of the study, the intention here is to contribute to a more holistic view by considering a range of stakeholders, namely school leaders, teachers, students and parents.

Key themes which emerged from the literature review supported the development and focus of individual research questions. Firstly, the review suggests there is a mismatch between formal policy on school autonomy over curriculum and actual autonomy as perceived by school leaders and teachers (Erss et al., 2016; Hong & Youngs, 2016; Gobby, 2013; Higham & Earley, 2013; Finnigan, 2007; Ascher & Greenberg, 2002). This issue is addressed in research question one which considers how school leaders and teachers have experienced their autonomy as the policy was enacted within the schools.

Secondly, the literature highlights the need to pay attention to schools' broader contexts when studying policy enactment (Holloway & Keddie, 2020; Ball et al., 2012; Thrupp & Lupton, 2006). This need is addressed in research question two where particular attention is given to how factors in schools' individual contexts impact their enactment of policy on school autonomy.

Thirdly, findings from the literature review reveal that policies on school autonomy in a range of countries have created additional workload and tensions among school leaders and teachers (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021; Keddie, Claire MacDonald, et al., 2020; Priestley et al., 2014; Kuiper & Berkvens, 2013; Holm & Lundström, 2011), and calls have been made for greater understanding about how such policies influence the working conditions of school leaders and teachers and school climates (OECD, 2018b). Research question three responds to this call by considering the issues and tensions in school leaders' and teachers' working context in relation to the new policy in Iceland.

Fourthly, the literature review illustrates how the relationship between students' freedom to choose and schools' autonomy over curriculum development can be seen as 'quasi market' (Lund, 2008; Whitty, 1997). However, it also shows that students' decision making is not simply a straightforward matching of demand and supply (Sych, 2016; Triventi et al., 2016; Brunello & Checchi, 2007; Rodeiro, 2007). This is particularly significant in the Icelandic context, where geographic and demographic factors can limit both students' choices and schools' scope to enhance their study offer (Prieto et al., 2019; C. Bell, 2009; Teelken et al., 2005; C. Taylor, 2002). These findings

supported the development of research question four which considers what the policy on school autonomy is believed to have achieved for students and whether the aim of increasing the diversity of the study offer to better meet students' needs has been achieved.

Considering the aim of the study and the above discussion, the following research questions were developed:

> 1, How did school leaders and teachers interpret the meaning of school autonomy as the policy was enacted within schools?
>
> 2, How did different contextual factors affect schools' ability to respond to the policy on increased school autonomy?
>
> 3, What issues and tensions did school leaders and teachers experience in relation to the policy enactment?
>
> 4, What did school stakeholders believe the policy on school autonomy was achieving for students?

Although research has explored how teachers and school leaders have perceived and responded to policy on school autonomy in the Icelandic context, much less is known about how schools have utilised their autonomy to make changes in their study offer, and the data available was mostly collected before full policy implementation in 2015. This study, therefore, makes a further contribution by exploring the enactment of policy on school autonomy at a time when schools had progressed much further through the process of utilising the policy to make changes to their programmes and were therefore better placed to reflect on that process and what it had achieved.

5 Methodology

The aim of this study is to increase understanding of how policy on curriculum autonomy in Icelandic upper secondary schools had been perceived by different stakeholders, and what they believe it is accomplishing. In order to achieve this, a multiple case study of four upper secondary schools was conducted to explore stakeholders' perceptions of policy on school autonomy over curriculum development. The stakeholders involved were school leaders, including head teachers and school board members, teachers, parents, and students.

This chapter presents the methodology adopted in order to answer the research questions set out in Chapter Four and provides justifications for the research design. The chapter is divided into seven sections. The first explains the philosophical assumptions which underpinned the qualitative approach adopted, the second covers the multiple case study design, and the third presents the criteria for the selection of cases and participants. The fourth and fifth sections describe the data collection and analysis process, the sixth addresses the trustworthiness of the study, and the seventh describes the research ethics.

5.1 Philosophical assumptions

This study is concerned with how school leaders, teachers, students and parents in Iceland perceived and interpreted the meaning and reality of policy on school autonomy over the curriculum. As such, the philosophical base for this research lies within interpretivism, which views reality as socially constructed, such that: "there is no single, observable reality. Rather there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). From an interpretivist perspective, the researcher "explores the 'meanings' of events and phenomena from the subjects' perspectives" (Briggs et al., 2012, p. 20); however, the resulting knowledge is not "found", but rather "constructed" by the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the focus is on the ways in which different groups of school stakeholders, namely, school leaders, teachers, parents, and students, perceive and experience policy on school autonomy over curriculum development. However, it remains mindful of the fact that, while groups may perceive the reality of phenomena in similar ways in some circumstances, it can be assumed that there will be differences between individuals within those groups (Briggs et al., 2012).

This study is grounded in interpretivism, and this underpinned the qualitative approach to research design adopted. This approach provided instruments both to collect and analyse data on stakeholders' perceptions and interpretations of policy on school

autonomy and to consider the different contexts of each school. In this regard, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlight four characteristics of qualitative research: "the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive" (p. 15). As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note, the researcher plays a central role as data-gatherer within this approach, and, therefore, the question of positionality is key. According to Creswell and Poth (2018) "all researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in a study" (p. 79). As explained in the introduction (See 1.1), I previously worked as a head teacher in an Icelandic upper secondary school and have first-hand experience of the policy implementation examined here. While this experience made it easier to access schools, it is acknowledged that, along with other personal characteristics, it might have influenced the research process and the interpretation of the data (Berger, 2015). However, a number of measures were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, and these are set out in 5.6 below.

In terms of the meaning of evidence in this study, Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) note that the position of the researcher in interpretive study means that it "cannot be understood as objectively mirroring or measuring the world" (p. 80). Instead, in line with the character of the interpretative research design, evidence is understood as "being brought into existence through the framing of a research question" (p. 79) and co-generated through the interaction between the researcher and the study participants and/or the way the researcher works with documents. In line with this understanding, the broad definition by Cairney (2016), where evidence is defined as "an argument or assertion backed by information" (p. 3), is used to clarify the meaning of evidences generated by this research.

5.2 Multiple case study design

Multiple case study design was used to study the enactment of policy on school autonomy over curriculum in four schools from the perspectives of the different stakeholders. The design drew on Yin's definition of case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in depth and within its real-life context," (Yin, 2014, p. 47). In this study, each school was seen as a demarcated case, but, together, the four schools formed a comprehensive study, which laid the foundation for the use of multiple-case design (Yin, 2014). The case-study design was selected for several reasons. Firstly, the enactment of policy on school autonomy over curriculum development is a complicated phenomenon to study and an approach was needed which could increase understanding of both the policy and its implementation. As Yin (2014) notes "the distinctive need for case-study research arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena" (p. 35) and "the more that your questions seek to explain some present circumstances (e.g., "how" or "why" some social phenomenon works), the more that case-study research will be relevant" (Yin,

2014, p. 34). Secondly, as noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), "a case study is a good approach when the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases." (p. 246). The multiple case study design made it possible to include four schools as units of analysis and enabled cross analysis of findings from their different contexts. The decision to include four schools was based on the fact that the aim of this study was not to generalise from the findings, but rather to reveal similar or contrasting themes across cases, and while a design with fewer cases (such a two or three) tends to be used to "predict similar results" (literal replication), more cases (such as four to six) are typically selected to "predict contrasting results" (theoretical replication) (Yin, 2014, p. 89). The third reason relates to the emphasis in the study on how schools' different contexts have affected the ways stakeholders have responded to policy on curriculum autonomy. In this regard the relevance of the case-study design relates to its suitability for analysis of the various contextual factors and backgrounds of the cases (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995). The next sections discuss the research design in more detail, including the selection of cases and participants and the methods for collecting and analysing the data.

5.3 Criteria for the selection of cases and participants

In this study, there were two levels of sampling. The first entailed the identification of four upper secondary schools which met certain core criteria and the second was to identify participants within those schools (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This was principally achieved through purposeful sampling, which is a non-probabilistic approach to sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The process of selecting the case-study schools involved categorising all the upper secondary schools in Iceland according to their location, size, study offer, history, and student intake. When selecting schools from these categorises, the first criterion was that there would be two schools from the capital area and two from the countryside, so as to represent different geographical contexts. The second was that the schools would be from different regions of the country, and the third was that there would be two academic schools and two comprehensive schools offering both academic and vocational study. The fourth criterion was that there would be one school of each type in the capital area and in the countryside. Then it was important to include schools with different histories, sizes, and intakes. The schools were selected with the intention that they would represent the diverse contexts of upper secondary schools in Iceland; however, it is recognised that this was only achieved to some extent, as each school can be considered as unique due to variations in their specific contexts. Table 6 shows how each of the selected schools matched the criteria. In order to preserve confidentiality, the names of the four schools are characterised by the letters, A, B, C and D throughout this study.

Table 6: Schools selected as case studies based on the selection criteria

School	Location	Size	Study offers	History	Student intake
School A	Capital area	Large	Academic and vocational	Long	All students
School B	Capital area	Average	Academic	Long	Highly selective
School C	Countryside	Small	Academic	Short	All students
School D	Countryside	Average	Academic and vocational	Long	All students

The criteria for selecting the interviewees were that they would bring different perspectives and were likely to contribute to a greater understanding of the research topic (Creswell, 2011). The process started by identifying which stakeholder groups would be included in the study. As the conceptual framework chapter explained, policy on curriculum autonomy can have different implications for different school stakeholders, so three different groups of stakeholders were selected: school leaders, teachers, and students and parents. These stakeholders are all key actors when it comes to policy enactment on curriculum autonomy in schools, although they are impacted in different ways. For example, in the case of school leaders, this is more likely to affect their role as decision-makers, while, for teachers, this might relate more to their professional autonomy over subject content. Despite the potential differences between them, students and parents were considered as one group because they hold different positions within schools by comparison with school leaders and teachers. The rationale behind this is that they hold power to influence schools collectively through their choice of school and study offer. Therefore, examining their perspectives was believed to increase understanding of the demand side of the policy on school autonomy, and the extent to which the supply side aim of increasing the study offer to better meet students' aims and needs was met.

The criteria for preferable participants within each stakeholder group were based on several arguments, each aiming to ensure a full range of perspectives were covered. In the case of school leadership, it was acknowledged that this category covers different roles. For example, the curriculum manager might bring in different experiences than the head teacher or the assistant head teacher. Members of school boards are also part of the school leadership, and they might bring different views than school leaders who work in their schools every day. In the case of teachers, they teach different subjects and have different working experiences. The criterion in this regard was to include both academic and vocational teachers in the comprehensive school cases. Careers advisers from all schools were also included, as they work closely with students, school leaders, teachers, and parents, and were therefore considered to bring in additional insights; however, they were grouped with the teachers to ensure their anonymity. In the case of

students and parents, it was considered preferable that they were also members of students' and parents' council; this related to the belief that these participants were more likely to have been involved in discussion on curriculum development within their schools.

Part of this sampling process was to decide on the adequate number of participants from each school. Although the initial plan was to recruit 17 participants from each school, the actual number of participants varied according to the nature of each case school. This reflected the differences between the cases and is in keeping with approaches in much qualitative research (Creswell, 2011). A total of 64 interviewees participated in the study, of whom 21 were school leaders, 20 teachers, and 23 students or parents. A table showing the number of participants from each school and their positions can be found in Appendix 1. However, minimal information is provided about the interviewers for the sake of anonymity and traceability; the gender of interviewees has also been changed (randomly) for the same reason. Since the study examines how interviewees have experienced the policy change introduced by the new Act in 2008 and the new National Curriculum Guide in 2011, it was important that they had substantial work experience before that time in order to be able to draw comparisons with the situation as it was then and to relate certain impacts to the policy on school autonomy. All school leaders who participated in the study had experience of managing or teaching before 2008 and most of them had over 20 years of experience of working within upper secondary schools. Most subject teachers who participated in interviews had considerable experience as teachers in upper secondary schools, ranging from 10 to 30 years. However, three teachers joined the profession after the passing of the new Act in 2008.

5.4 Data collection

In this study, two sources of data were used, documents and interviews, both of which are commonly used in case-study research (Yin, 2014). The term 'documents' in this case refers to the use of secondary sources, whereas interviews are the primary source of data for the research. As noted in Chapter One, in this study, all the data were collected and analysed in Icelandic; however, the extracts provided in this thesis have been translated into English by the researcher.

5.4.1 The documents

Following Yin (2014), documents were used in this case-study research "to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources" (p. 133). More specifically, the main purpose of using documents was to support evidence from the interviews and to provide contextual data on each school (Bowen, 2009) in relation to the enactment of the policy on school autonomy over curriculum development. The criteria for the selection of types of documents were established as follows. Firstly, that they would be

official, and, as such, could be accessed on the schools' websites or on the websites of the MoE and the Directorate of Education. Secondly, that they would provide similar or standard data on the schools' situated and material context. Thirdly, that they would provide data on the enactment of policy on school autonomy over curriculum development. The main types of documents which met these criteria are listed in Table 7.

Table 7: Types of documents used for data collection

Types of documents	
Annual reports	School contracts with the MoE
Reports on schools' internal evaluations	Other official school reports and documents
Reports on external evaluations	General information on the schools´ websites

The annual reports from the schools were identified as sources of general information about students and schools' study offers. They were also believed to provide data about the process of the enactment of the policy on curriculum autonomy and key milestones in that regard. The internal evaluations typically include student surveys and reports on various aspects of the schools' work, including curriculum development. Likewise, external evaluations cover similar factors, including progress in implementing the National Curriculum Guide, curriculum development in general, and particular challenges in the schools' contexts. Evaluations are conducted every five years and at a different time for each school, so some evaluation reports were older than others. The school contracts with the MoE vary in length, (e.g. 2-4 years) and state, amongst other things, the aims to be met in relation to curriculum development and study offers by the schools. How effectively these aims have been reached is then covered in the annual reports and the internal reports. However, the presentation of these documents varies between schools, and curriculum issues are covered to varying degrees. Where reports relating directly to the enactment of the policy in individual schools existed, these were also used; however, comparable reports did not exist in all schools. Information from the schools' websites was used as required, for example, for information about enrolment requirements. A list showing the documents from each school can be found in Appendix 2. However, minimal information is provided about the documents for the sake of anonymity and traceability.

5.4.2 The interviews

Interviews were chosen as the main data source for this study. The rationale was twofold. Firstly, the aim of the study was to understand policy on school autonomy over curriculum and its enactment from the perspectives of different stakeholders. In this regard, using interviews enabled the researcher "to enter into the other person's perspectives" (Patton, 2015, p. 426) and to engage participants "in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study" (deMarrais, 2003, p. 55). Secondly, policy on school autonomy over curriculum development is a complicated

phenomenon, and, in the case of this study, the process of enactment in schools had started several years earlier. Therefore the purpose of using interviews was also to be able to ask questions about stakeholders' experience of "past events that are impossible to replicate." (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 108).

Semi-structured interviews were used because of the flexibility they offer to explore the research subject in depth. It was seen as an advantage to have some structure around the main topics to be covered in relation to the research questions but with the flexibility to ask follow-up questions and to open up new perspectives (Newby, 2014). Interviews protocols with open-ended questions were developed for the different groups of stakeholders (See Appendix 3), and pilot interviews were conducted with friends and former colleagues to test the clarity and relevance of the questions. The structure of the interviews was kept similar for all groups, but there was some variation in the questions posed. Thus, while school leaders and teachers were asked a similar set of questions, there was some customisation to reflect their different positions in the school. For example, while both leaders and teachers were asked about general changes in relation to the policy on school autonomy, teachers were also asked about their own teaching subjects. In addition, parents and students were asked questions more closely related to their choice of school and study programme.

Both individual and group interviews were conducted. School leaders within the schools and teachers were interviewed individually, and this was intended to give participants time and scope to express their personal experiences and discuss the topic in depth. By contrast, members of school boards, parents, and students were interviewed in discrete groups, for the following reasons. Firstly, board members, parents, and students have different positions in relation to schools than school leaders and teachers, so they are not involved to the same extent in the enactment of policy, and it was thought that participation in a group interview would encourage and deepen their discussion about the policy from their particular perspectives. This is in line with Gillham (2005), who notes that group interviews "may reveal dynamics through interaction, and issues not apparent in individual interviews." (p. 79). In addition, it was believed that students, in particular, would feel more comfortable in a group interview and that participating in a more social environment would empower them to "express their opinion[s]" (Briggs, 2003, p. 255). On a practical level, group interviews are often less time consuming than individual interviews (Cohen et al., 2011), and the period of time for data collection was limited. As noted above, interviews were conducted and transcribed in Icelandic to ensure that all participants were able to express their ideas in their first language. The extracts from the interviews which appear in Chapter 6 were translated by the researcher.

5.4.3 Access and entry

Concerning access and entry, the process began with a formal letter being sent to head teachers requesting that the schools participate in the study (See Appendix 4). Head teachers were then asked to nominate a 'gatekeeper' within their schools who could assist with accessing participants from the different stakeholder groups (Cohen et al., 2011). In instances where the number of individuals in a stakeholder group was greater than the requested number of participants, as, for instance, in the case of teachers, volunteers were selected from different study subjects. Every participant was sent an information sheet about the study, an invitation letter, and a consent form. In most cases, the forms giving informed consent were signed at the beginning of the interviews; however, in the case of students who were under 18, their parents were also asked to sign the form beforehand. The consent form used in the study can be found in Appendix 5.

The interviews were conducted in 2018. Two schools were visited during the period from March through to May and two during the period between October and November. A total of 44 interviews were conducted, of which 32 were individual interviews and 12 group interviews, with a total of 64 participants. The average length of each interview was about an hour. All the interviews except two took place in the schools; the other two were held elsewhere as that proved to be more suitable for the interviewees due to timing and location issues. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees.

5.5 Data analysis

Analysis of the data was conducted in two steps: within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Yin, 2014). The within-case analysis was intended to understand and describe each case as distinctive (Miles et al., 2014). Part of the preparation for this process involved the transcription of the interviews, and assistance was obtained from the Námsmannaráðgjöf[15] to transcribe about half of them. The different data sources, interviews, group interviews, and documentary analysis were then brought together and organised separately for each school. The process of analysing the interviews started with open coding, where comments and notes were made in the margins with a focus on patterns related to the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Then axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) was applied to categorise codes and data from the interviews into themes and subthemes for each school. For example, codes and data on teachers' concerns related to study material or the time needed for changes were

[15] Námsmannaráðgjöf is an organisation which provides professional services for university students in Iceland, including counselling, assistance, and study support. See: https://namsmannaradgjof.weebly.com/ (in Icelandic).

categorised into a subtheme named 'Teachers' professional responsibility and quality of study'. The within-case analysis generated four overarching categories/themes; these were the same for all cases, but the subthemes or subcategories within them were different. The names given to the overarching themes were intended to be descriptive of their contribution to the research questions developed for the study. This is in line with Merriam and Tisdell (2016), who noted that, "since the categories or themes or findings are responsive (providing answers) to these research questions, the name of these categories will be congruent with the orientation of the study." (p. 211). The above process was repeated and revisited several times. The analysis of documents was then intended to better understand the context of each school and the local challenges related to the enactment of policy on school autonomy over curriculum. Information from the documents from each school and interviews with different stakeholders allowed for certain comparisons and triangulation within each case.

The process of analysing documents entailed "finding, selecting, appraising, (making sense of), and synthesising data in documents" (Bowen, 2009, p. 28) from the four schools. This included reading all the annual reports, self-evaluation reports and external evaluation reports available on the schools' websites since 2008. In this part of the process, the focus was on gathering background information for each school and making sense of their histories. As highlighted by Bowen (2009), "such information and insight can help readers understand the historical roots of specific issues and can indicate the conditions that impinge upon the phenomena currently under investigation" (pp. 29-30). This step also entailed looking for data on the process of enacting the policy on school autonomy, because, as Bowen (2009) notes, "documents can provide a means of tracking change and development" (p. 30). This served two purposes: it provided evidence which could be used to verify data from interviews, and it helped to make the timing of the events and challenges in the change process clearer. Some schools had specific reports on their history of change; these were also read and analysed in the same way. In the next step, data in the form of quotations selected from the reports were organised into separate documents for each school. Then a description for each school was written, supported by selected quotations from the document analysis. These included a detailed description of the context and historical background to each school and the process of enacting the policy on school autonomy each of them experienced. In order to reduce traceability, these descriptions were shortened afterwards.

The second step in the analysis process was the cross-case analysis. This entailed "examining themes across cases to discern themes that are common and different to all cases" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 637). The intention was to deepen understanding of policy on school autonomy in relation to the schools' various contextual dimensions. The cross-case analysis was done by comparing results from each of the four overarching themes which emerged from the within-case analysis.

5.6 Trustworthiness

In this study triangulation, member checking, and ethical practices became the main strategies to establish the trustworthiness of the findings. Triangulation was seen as especially useful because of the different data sources included in the study and was used to strengthen internal validity. In this regard, internal validity deals with questions like "How congruent are the findings with reality?" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 242). Following Denzin (2009) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), two types of triangulation were used to enhance the trustworthiness of findings from within the cases: multiple methods of data collection and multiple sources of data. In the case of multiple methods of data collection, information and data from documents were used to clarify and confirm data from interviews. An example in this regard is how the schools' challenges in the process of utilising autonomy for change highlighted in the interviews were also prominent in the schools' reports. In the case of multiple sources of data, interviews with different stakeholders and individuals within these groups enabled comparison of themes and issues raised both within and across cases. This sometimes revealed the same themes across groups within a school, for example school leaders' and teachers' perceptions of the impact of financial frameworks on policy enactment, but from different perspectives. Similar themes and issues raised were then also found in other schools. However, differences between schools in terms of which issues were raised were also found, and these called for explanations, often related to differences in the schools' local context.

The second strategy for enhancing trustworthiness was member checking. This approach entails "taking tentative interpretations/findings back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if they are plausible" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 259). Following Thomas (2006), the stakeholders' check included selected participants from each school being asked to read and comment on the findings when the process of drafting the thesis was almost completed. The ethical practices which enhance the study's trustworthiness are discussed in the next section.

In terms of transferability, thick description (Geertz, 1973) can "enhance the possibility of the results ... 'transferring' to another setting" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 256). Thick description as used in this study "refers to a description of the setting and participants of the study, as well as a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, ..., and documents" (p. 257). The purposeful selection of the four schools in order to represent the diversity of upper secondary schools in Iceland and the different stakeholder groups participating in the study will also "enable more readers to apply ... findings to their situations" (p. 257).

5.7 Research ethics

This doctoral study was begun at the University of Nottingham in Autumn 2016; however, in Spring 2020, an application was made to complete the research at the School of Education, University of Iceland. The research was therefore guided by the frameworks for research ethics from both the University of Nottingham and the University of Iceland. Prior to data collection, which took place in Iceland, approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee in the School of Education at Nottingham University and the research was also reported to The Icelandic Data Protection Authority.

In addition, the conduct of the research was informed by an awareness that "actual ethical practice comes down to the individual researcher's own values and ethics" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 261). Various steps were taken to ensure the research practices were ethical, that participants were able to give informed consent, and that their privacy was protected as far as possible, and these are discussed below.

Particular efforts were made to ensure that everyone involved in the study understood its purpose and was able to give informed consent. As explained above, head teachers from each of the four schools were contacted informally at the beginning of the data collection process and informed about the purpose of the study. They were also asked about the best timing, the possibility of conducting interviews in the schools, and the possibility of a specific contact person (gatekeeper) being identified to assist with reaching participants. Following that, each school received a letter in which they were formally asked to participate in the study. The gatekeepers from each school assisted in accessing participants, and they all received formal invitation letters with information about what the study was about and what their participation would entail. They also received an information sheet in which the study and the data collection process were explained. This also confirmed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. Participants were also informed that their data would be stored in a secure place by the researcher and only used for the purposes of the research.

All participants were asked to sign informed consent forms, and, in cases where students were under 18, their parents signed the form as well. Interviewees were also asked for their consent before interviews were recorded. In addition, an interview protocol was used for all the interviews, and each one started by introducing the background of the researcher and the research topic. Participants were informed particularly about the researcher's former experience as a head teacher and her work at the Directorate of Education.

The formal invitation letter sent to head teachers included information about how anonymity would be protected, both regarding the names of the schools and the interviewees, and this was also mentioned in the Information Sheet. This included

schools and interviewees being given different names (e.g. School A, B, etc) from the very beginning to ensure anonymity. However, the small number of upper secondary schools in Iceland makes it a challenge to prevent the schools becoming identifiable, not least because of the number and range of participants involved. As a result, particular care was also taken to try to ensure that none of the details included in this thesis could be used to identify the participants or the case study schools.

5.8 Summary

This chapter has presented the methodology used to study policy on school autonomy over curriculum in four schools as perceived by the different stakeholders. The rationale behind the adoption of the interpretivism approach, which underpinned the qualitative research design, has been given and the reasons for the choice of a multiple case-study design. The levels of sampling, for schools and interviewers, have also been described. The processes of data collection from two sources, documents and interviews, and the two types of analysis conducted, within-case analysis and cross-case analysis, have also been discussed. The chapter has concluded by explaining how triangulation, member checking, and ethical practices were used to establish the trustworthiness of the study. In the next chapter, the findings from the data analysis are presented, with findings from the within-case analysis introduced first followed by those from the cross-case analysis.

6 Findings – case studies

Findings from case studies of the four schools selected for this study are presented in four subchapters below, one for each case. Each of these subchapters starts with facts and findings from analysis of documents with the aim of providing insights into the schools' different contexts and challenges in utilising the policy on school autonomy. The discussion is then structured around the four overarching themes which emerged from the analysis of the interview data, each of which relates to one of the research questions. These themes are: participants' interpretation of messages from policy documents; the impact of contextual factors on policy enactment in schools; the new policy in relation to school leaders' and teachers' working environments; and, the new policy and changes for students. Each subchapter concludes with a summary.

6.1 Case study of School A

School A is a large comprehensive school with a long history, located in the capital, Reykjavík, The composition of the population in the surrounding area is diverse; however, overall, average income per capita is lower than in other areas of the capital (Reykjavík City, n.d.). In 2011, School A offered a reasonably broad range of academic, art and vocational study programmes, including a study programme for disabled students and an upper secondary programme for students who had not achieved the required result in compulsory schooling (DA7).[16] These students were able to enrol on the programme before going onto other study programmes (DA11). The content of this subchapter is hereafter divided into five main sections. The first reports findings from analysis of documents about School A and gives insight into the process of enacting policy on school autonomy and the challenges reported in formal documents. These span a 10-year period from 2010 - 2022 and include annual reports to the MoE, external evaluations, self-evaluation reports, and enrolment details. A list of all the documents from School A can be found in Appendix 2, and anonymised details of the study participants from the school are provided in Appendix 1. In the sections thereafter, the four main themes which emerged from the interviews are explored.

[16] This type of code (i.e. D + letter (the school) + number (the document) relates to the list of documents in Appendix B.

6.1.1 Policy enactment and challenges in the school's context

When the new policy on school autonomy over curriculum development was introduced in 2008, School A was dealing with a substantial operating deficit (DA1), and keeping the school within budget remained a challenge over the next few years (DA6). The school's 2010 annual report suggests that, at that time, policy work within the school was focused on structure and values rather than the curriculum, and a new organizational chart was introduced, with directors of various faculties and professional managers for different subjects (DA2). However, the report also indicates that the head teacher considered the revision of the curriculum as one of the major challenges ahead:

> Various challenges are ahead, such as to reshape the school's education offer within the framework of the new upper secondary education act … to further develop our service to students who are struggling in their studies, [and] to develop demanding study options for strong students. (DA2)

This quote reveals the breadth of students' learning ability within the school; however, a quote from another school leader in the external evaluation in 2011 suggests that one of the school's challenges relates to its image:

> We are dealing with a certain image problem …, School A is not the school for the best students, 'The ones who go there do not get into other schools'. This is what we hear. (DA7)

The perception here is that the low income neighbourhood in which the school is situated has created certain image problems; however, the external evaluation also highlighted high drop-out rates and "a shortage of stronger academic students" as some of the school's weaknesses. (DA7).

In 2012, the school started to review its study programmes in line with the new law on increased school autonomy and the new National Curriculum Guide issued in 2011. The initial work undertaken is described in the school's annual report 2012 as follows: "draft of structure for academic study programmes were made and various ideas were proposed on school climate and teaching and study arrangements" (DA3). However, because of a shortage of finance for curriculum work and an ongoing dispute over teachers' salaries, the work was put on hold until 2015 (DA3). In that year, the academic programmes for matriculation were shortened from four to three years in line with the requirements from the MoE. In the school's self-evaluation report 2014-2015, one of the professional managers described how the workload that generated had affected morale:

> The teachers on the programme have been under significant pressure this school year. This is due to various factors: workload because of new curricula, and work on writing course descriptions and organising the

> study so that it becomes a three-year programme for matriculation. This new structure entails a certain cut which creates insecurity among teachers about their earnings and future job security. This situation has influenced the morale within the faculty and in the whole school. (DA9)

Despite the increased workload and concerns about job security, one of the teachers was hired to oversee the curriculum changes and the school managed to start teaching several revised study programmes in autumn 2015 (DA5). However, a lot of work was still to be done, including the revision of the vocational study programmes (DA6). In 2016, further changes were made to the school's organisational structure: the number of school leaders was reduced by one and professional management for different academic and arts subjects was cut but kept for the vocational faculties. This was done to reduce costs; however, it led to the external evaluation report from 2016 identifying the governing body as too small for the size of the school (DA8) and further increased the workload for both school leaders and teachers.

One particular problem identified in the 2016 external evaluation was that the older programmes had to run concurrently with the revised programmes until students had graduated from them. This also created extra work for staff, including the need to map new courses to old ones:

> Similar study is therefore temporarily taught according to two systems with extra effort and load on schoolwork. On the school's website, extensive tables can be found that have been prepared by the school on the matching of course units in a new system compared to the old. (DA8)

This quote suggests that the main curriculum work at that time focused on aligning courses and study programmes with the requirements of the National Curriculum Guide framework rather than making changes in the content of education. However, new study programmes were introduced, including a new computer studies programme (DA4), an innovation study programme (DA10) and an open study programme for matriculation (DA6).

Despite these challenges, the external evaluation report in 2016 described the study offer as "very diverse" and noted that "the school has steadily adapted to the changing needs of students in the neighbourhood and the economy." (DA8). However, the school was still facing the same challenges regarding its image and the student body as before. One of the suggestions for improvement in that report echoes that of 2011 in suggesting that the school should focus on recruiting more outstanding students (DA8). The story of School A told in these documents suggests that one of its main challenges was an image problem related to its location, and, more specifically, how the school could utilise its autonomy to develop its study offer to keep a broad range of students within the school.

6.1.2 Participants' interpretation of messages from policy documents

When participants were asked how they perceived the policy on school autonomy, two policy documents became prominent in the discussion, The Upper Secondary Education Act no. 92/2008 and the National Curriculum Guide 2011. In addition, participants highlighted the requirement for schools to shorten study time for matriculation, which was supposed to be completed in autumn 2015. In this section, participants' interpretations of the main messages from these policy documents are explored and how the shortening requirement shaped their experience.

The Upper Secondary Education Act 2008

School leaders within School A interpreted school autonomy very much as it appears in the law. The head teacher described the new policy as "very open, very open laws which allow very much" (IA1).[17] The members of the school board highlighted the importance of the policy for schools to meet the diverse interests and needs of their students. From their point of view "the problem of the school system ... has been that everything is always meant to be cast into the same mould" (IA16). However, they reported that they did not experience much actual participation in developing the education offer:

> We only discuss a bit about ... that there are new study programmes; we are informed, we are not taking decisions, and we do not have all the prerequisites, ... we do not have time either. (IA15)

The board members also pointed out that they were all appointed by the city and the minister of education,[18] and one suggested that it might be better for the school to have more diverse representatives, including someone from the economy side, "who could then help with policy making or development of education offer, [as] we are all linked to some political parties." (IA16).

The autonomy to make changes in content within each subject is seen, to a large extent, as in the hand of the teachers:

> It is seen a bit like that the teachers are the professionals, and they have a lot to say about how things are within their subject [and] in their department. I think it is very rare for head teacher or school authorities to interfere with that. (IA2)

[17] This type of code refers to the list of participants in Appendix A.

[18] As reported in 2.3.1, under the new Act (92/2008), the minister of education appoints all five members, but two are appointed after a nomination from the local government.

This quote from the assistant head teacher suggests that the teachers are trusted as professionals and given considerable autonomy when it comes to course content. This view was also found among teachers, who perceived the lack of interference as trust in their capabilities:

> We previously had a head teacher who did not interfere much with us, not in a negative sense, but in a positive way, [and] we still have a head teacher who does not [do so]; we are trusted, so that professional autonomy has not changed with the coming of this new policy. (IA5)

This quote also suggests that teachers relate the scope of their professional autonomy more to trust from school leaders than the influence of the new policy. The vocational teachers who were interviewed were both professional managers of faculties for certified trades. They had not experienced much change in their professional autonomy with the coming of the policy. Teacher 7 explained "very little at least … we just get to be, these faculties, usually, a bit autonomous, we control it almost, we can say from A to Z. (IA7).

By contrast, parents and students who were interviewed did not experience much participation in the development or decision making on the educational offer within the school. One of the students, who is the non-voting member of the school board, commented that:

> If there is anything then it is just me who sits in the School Board meetings, which are twice a year or something … if something has been discussed related to this sometime, then it has been at these meetings, otherwise it is not discussed. (IA9)

However, all the parents reported doubts about how much participation they should have in the curriculum work of the school:

> I can have opinions and experience that something is not working, and then I communicate, but I trust the professionals for this. … I am not necessarily sure that it is good that too many can have their fingers in the professional work of schools, whether it is the policy making of study programmes or curriculum or something else. (IA14)

Parents also appear to associate policy on school autonomy with trust in the professionals in the schools. Like the members of the school board quoted earlier, they question their own prerequisites to interfere much in the work on the education offer within the school.

The National Curriculum Guide 2011

All the interviewed teachers reported experiencing the implementation of the new National Curriculum Guide 2011 as complicated work which took up much time:

> This was really enormous work to find out what everything should be – how many credits ... one was supposed to go through the competence and skill criteria in every course unit and write them, fix them and the descriptions of the course units and put the course units, on what level they should be. (IA8)

This quote from Teacher 8 highlights how the National Curriculum Guide entailed various initiatives, including the implementation of a new ideology in education: competence-based learning. The new system entailed each course getting a new name; however, numerous school leaders and teachers reported that they found the old system, with central names for the courses, simpler and more transparent: "Now there are some letters which nobody understands and have no meaning and don't tell where in the order the course is, and students complain a lot about this." (IA5).

Teacher 5 described how he saw the new ideology of the National Curriculum Guide as a top-down policy imperative and thought more conversation with teachers was needed at the very beginning:

> When it started with this policy, then there were no, as far as I know, conversations between, shall we call us the grassroots or the people on the ground and the education authorities or the ministry, ... and then this is actually like, as soon as the schools are given freedom, then it is said, 'But you have to do this like this, here you get knowledge, skills da da da - now you have to put [everything] here into this formula which we have made for you, and you have to deliver this and we accept or reject, but we are giving you freedom.' (IA5)

This quote indicates that the National Curriculum Guide framework is seen as limiting school autonomy to some extent.

Interviews also revealed a complex confirmation process for the study programmes. The professional managers for the vocational faculties described how their programmes needed to be reviewed by the occupational councils, with the Directorate of Education acting as an intermediary:

> We submitted the study programme to the Directorate of Education, which takes it to the occupational council, and the occupational council comes up with questions which go to the Directorate of Education which sends them to us. We answer them, and this goes back to ... we do not know what happens if it will not be approved. (IA8)

They were also concerned about how long their revised study programmes had been waiting in the system for final approval by the MoE once the process through the Directorate of Education was over. "We are not talking about weeks, we are talking about months." (IA7). Vocational Teacher 8 similarly reported that they wanted to

graduate students from the revised study programme this spring but were still waiting for approval. Both vocational teachers reported that they would like to have more autonomy over their students' overall study process, including managing "how the student gets a workplace contract, ... [so], if you start study in carpentry, then you do not need to know someone to get a workplace contract." (IA7). However, Teacher 8 reported that their experience of the bureaucratic confirmation process had raised questions about their autonomy to enact later changes:

> It is just actually a huge and difficult process to make changes, to go through that again ... like we just know, if you try to do something new, it is not always like you thought it would be, and things needs to be fixed. If we are supposed to have this autonomy, are we then not going to have autonomy? (IA8)

To summarise, most interviews with school leaders and teachers in School A revealed some concern over barriers due to increased bureaucracy with the introduction of the new National Curriculum Guide.

The Shortening of the Study Time Required for Matriculation

The requirement of the MoE that schools should shorten the study time of academic programmes for matriculation was experienced as top down by some and became controversial within School A. As Teacher 4 commented:

> The shortening made it difficult for us; it came, in fact, in the middle of things. You have got a certain framework, a certain freedom and things, and then, all of a sudden, comes shortening, and, you know, it came completely from above and in complete opposition to us. (IA4)

This quote further highlights how the shortening of the study time contrasted somewhat with the National Curriculum Guide, which allowed for study programmes to be of different length. The work on shortening the study programmes also had an impact on the implementation of the Guide in the school, as this quote from Teacher 5 indicates:

> The shortening for matriculation, it became the main thing, rather than these ideals or what one should call new ideology on defining education based on competence, knowledge and skills - these completely coincided into one. (IA5)

Thus, in some cases, reducing course offers to shorten the study time appears to have dominated the overall work on the revision of the study programmes in line with the ideology of the new Guide.

6.1.3 The impact of contextual factors on policy enactments in school

The interviews revealed three main themes regarding how factors in the school's context had impacted the enactment of policy on school autonomy over the curriculum. The first one relates to professional context and policy making in the school and describes school leaders' and teachers' views on changes in the school's curriculum. The second relates to the creation of new study within the MoE's funding framework and how this impacted the school's scope for change. The third theme addresses students' choice and describes the character of demands relating to the school and the study options available from the students' and parents' perspectives.

Professional context and policy making

Leaders in School A initially had expectations that the enactment of the policy on increased autonomy would lead to more changes than it actually did. The head teacher described an early meeting in which bold ideas were generated:

> There was a meeting in the spring in 2012, a very enjoyable meeting, which we called the 'magic theatre', and the whole community was represented, and, at that time, the plan was to go through proper work on ideas about what kind of education should be offered, and there was great enthusiasm here among people and many fun ideas came up, and, in many ways, bold ideas. (IA1)

This quote suggests that people were open to change when the work started. However, the interviews also revealed divided views among teachers and school leaders, which seemed to be mainly about how much choice students should have. The assistant head teacher reported that "one had to fight a bit against [those] … who think studying in an open programme is poor education [because], they [students] may just choose what they want." (IA2). Teacher 6 explained that some teachers were concerned that students might not chose the most appropriate subjects to support their future study at university:

> You are educating someone who is maybe going for engineering, but, at the same time, he has chosen this and that, which makes him more versatile and with a better view of things. […] Sometimes it appears that diversity is the main priority - that students choose a bit north and a bit south … then they see that they need more maths, more chemistry, physics, and are coming back into the schools although they have the matriculation. […] I think men are still a little worried that students are maybe not choosing the best preparation for what they are going for at university, but, regarding general good education, this is maybe good. (IA6)

This quote from Teacher 6 reveals tension between two perspectives. On one hand is versatility, which is thought to be the benefit of diversity and free selection, on the other

is the need to go into more depth in subjects in line with university requirements. This quote also reveals the tension between students being more responsible for their choices and how teachers experience their responsibility for students' choice.

Concerns were also expressed about the way the school's policy on offering courses and study programmes might impact the overall composition of the student group. This was based on previous experience when students' right to choose a school regardless of their residence came into effect and the school started to lose stronger academic students. As Teacher 5 recalled:

> It gradually changes, the school stops being a local school, [and] students start to go to other schools, at the same time. I do not know what is the cause and what is the consequence. At the same time, study programmes like physics were shut down … when such strong science study programmes were gone from the school, then students with certain skills and competence began to attend other schools where they are still offered, for example, study programmes in physics for matriculation - this has changed things a lot. (IA5)

This suggests that students' freedom to choose schools made those already taking stronger academic students more popular, making it more difficult for School A to continue to offer science study programmes with fewer students choosing it. Teacher 4 explained teachers' concerns about how this affected the status of the school:

> To have a mixed school, not losing all the good students, then, politically speaking, a school like School A must hold tight to the matriculation to not become substandard. This is what all the teachers and staff here were thinking - so this is just political […] We don't want it to become a new system like it was when I was growing up – where you had such a class division depending on the school you were in. It's already a bit like that, but it would be complete if School A had taken the decision to graduate students from study programmes without giving them access to university, then this would be over, so the school's autonomy is exactly nothing. (IA4)

The quote reveals the view that if the school were to deviate from ideas on what constitutes good preparation for university it would lose stronger students and this would affect its status in the hierarchies of schools. This led to the head teacher introducing a policy direction with a focus on matriculation as a good preparation for university study, a decision which, as she acknowledged, became controversial:

> … so I took this responsibility, to close a little bit the ideas, … there were some individuals in the school who were very disappointed. […] One of the arguments for this is that the school [has] always has a little bit of difficulty when it comes to respect and status, and you can hear it within the teachers' group - they emphasise it very much – [they] find it

> important that study in this school is equivalent to study in other schools, that the matriculation examination is providing as good a preparation as in some other schools downtown. (IA1)

This echoes Teacher 4's view that the reputation of a school depends greatly on how well the matriculation is believed to prepare students for university. When the study programmes were revised, a reduction was needed as schools were required to shorten the study time for matriculation. However, the head teacher decided that compulsory courses in mathematics should still form a relatively large part of each programme for matriculation: "The curriculum was just these 200 units, so a reduction was needed, a change was needed; [however,] what I emphasised was that it would include a lot of maths everywhere." (IA1).

Changes in vocational study were also to some extent disputed, especially over the extent of diversity in the certified trades. Teacher 7 explained her view that the policy on school autonomy could be positive to some extent in creating more diversity between schools but not for certified trades:

> In some respects I think it is good, but not in other respects, for example regarding vocational study; the schools that are teaching it must go together, students go between [them], ... though they are not teaching exactly the same but to a large extent [...]. Most schools have been receiving this curriculum that we built up and are doing a lot of their work based on it, so that we are going together to some extent. And then, it is, of course, another thing [that is] a bit of a problem today - that the course names need preferably to be the same, so that the student knows, ... he needs to know a bit more where he stands. (IA7)

This quote highlights the belief that one of the consequences of diversity between schools will be that it is more difficult for students to move between them and know where they stand in their studies. As a result, the work on reviewing some of the study programmes for certified trades was made in cooperation with other vocational schools. Vocational teacher 7 reported that some other schools had decided to wait for them to start work first: "I have heard from [name of vocational schools] that they are watching what we did, the three schools together in the beginning." (IA7).

In School A, the policy on assessment had been to increase the use of formative assessment and decrease the use of final tests. However, teachers still had considerable freedom over which assessment methods they used, with the support of the head teacher: "I have not taken a final decision and said that summative assessment has to end; I have said the professionals have to decide for themselves." (IA1). For Teacher 4, formative assessment is in line with the aim of the new policy: "it is very much assessing the work of the students, which is naturally in the spirit of the laws rather than tests" (IA4); yet, Teacher 6 explained that some teachers believe that the use of

formative assessment involves fewer study requirements and this may affect students' university preparation:

> Many teachers think that it's a way to reduce [study] requirements; [however,] this can be debated because [if] you use more diverse teaching methods, you have different assessments. But, when it comes to it, in the end, is the student equally well prepared? Then we are mostly talking about for university, of course. (IA6)

This suggests that some teachers consider the move away from the use of final tests towards more diverse methods is leading to less reliable assessments of student's preparedness for university.

Creation of new study within the financial framework

One of the prominent themes that emerged from the interviews was a shortage of resources. The members of the school board described how the allocation of finance to schools is based upon the number of students who finish their study each term and the number of courses completed. The government's argument for this model was that the schools would benefit because this would reduce drop-out;[19] however, this can also bring additional costs to schools with higher drop-out rates:

> In this system, which is naturally tailored to the highly selective[20] schools, a student that starts study here, he is some unit in some allocation model of the Ministry … if he quits mid-term then he costs … and we must pay. (IA15)

This quote highlights how the allocation model makes the operation of schools such as School A more demanding. Participant 15 pointed out that the high drop-out rate meant

[19] This allocation model has been in place since 1998 and is related to government concerns over higher drop-out rates in Iceland than in neighbouring countries and the influence of the implementation of NPM (Sigurðsson, 2008). However, a report from the National Audit Office in 2014 concluded that: "Such drop out varies between schools but mainly concerns those who have mixed student groups and a high proportion of older students. This problem needs to be addressed as schools can only influence this to a limited extent, but it is causing them increased costs. In the opinion of the National Audit Office it is also right to review this measurement to better promote the quality of teaching and equality of schools." (The Icelandic National Audit Office, 2014, p. 4. Translated from Icelandic by the researcher.)

[20] This term is used as these schools are very popular, and they can therefore be highly selective in terms of the students they admit; however, in Iceland, it is more common to speak of 'class-based schools'. There are still a small number of class-based schools, mostly in the capital area, but most upper secondary schools are comprehensive schools with unit-based systems.

"that for many years we were just talking about money, because the school owed such an enormous amount of money." (IA15). It seems that while schools are encouraged to focus on providing study suited to all students, it is in fact more beneficial for schools to offer study for stronger students. Students with difficulties in learning are considered to be more likely to drop out of school, and, if they do, then schools lose some of the funds which they have been spending on teaching over the term.

With an unchanged financial framework, the school's scope for introducing new courses, without dropping others at the same time, is limited without an increase in the number of students. The curriculum manager described how offering new study programmes, like the innovation study programme and the open study programme, was mainly achieved in the form of changes made within the current course offer:

> We use the [existing] courses because the supply of students is not endless, so that we just draw from the current study programmes to create a study programme - there are only four [completely] new courses in there, all the others are just from the system. (IA3)

School leader 2 pointed out that the school had tried to come up with a new study programme related to a growing industry in the country: tourism studies. "We have tried to go with tourism studies, [...] [but] it has not been exciting enough, [...] and there isn't actually any teaching material either" (IA2). This quote reveals another challenge: that the needs of the economy and the interests of students do not necessarily coincide.

However, and regardless of changes in the education offer, the National Curriculum Guide had to be implemented. Teacher 4 recalled how it provoked disputes and conflicts within the school, especially when teachers experienced insufficient payments for the additional work:

> There was much dispute among teachers because of payments for this project, ... so there was all this creativity that follows when building up a new school, and we were involved in this process for so long, and, in the end, there were no visible financial changes that would follow. (IA4)

Another factor which limits the school's ability to change or increase its education offer is the availability of suitable housing and equipment. The members of the School Board highlighted the importance of good housing for the school to evolve; facilities for students had been improved but new housing for art and vocational studies was still needed:

> We need to go for certain enlargements here: the building which we are sitting in now is relatively new, an expansion which had become essentially because it was quite horrible here before, the facilities for

> students especially. [...] But these vocational facilities still need to be improved, you know. (IA15)

As the quote reveals, improvements and changes in the study offer depend on suitable housing, not least in vocational studies where space is needed for practical work. Changes and development in the content of vocational study also depend on financing for devices and machines, as Teacher 7 noted:

> This has certainly been a restraint for the vocational departments, ... when the schools get little finance then there is naturally nothing with which to buy machines. (IA7)

When there is no additional financing for buildings or machines, it means that any changes in the education offer must be accommodated within the current facilities.

Students' demands for school and study

Interviews with students and parents revealed two prominent themes relating to students' choice of school and study: students' uncertainty of choice and the belief that some subjects are more important than others. The former arises because not all students are sure what they want to learn when they start upper secondary school. Student 11 pointed out that younger students are more uncertain, and may later regret their decisions:

> I don't really know how it is with 16 years, whether they are equally much thinking of it, some future needs, maybe more the extra-curricular activities ... many of my friends are maybe having a bit, like, bitterness towards certain study because they don't find it useful ... which they had maybe spend their time in. (IA11)

For students to make good use of their time, it is important that they choose to study within their field of interest in the very beginning. This is also believed to be important to prevent drop out:

> Most [students] who I know who have quit, they have come directly from elementary school and kept on in academic study and then they are not liking the academic study - that is like the pattern I see. And there are naturally other friends who have been in same situation, but they have moved into vocational studies and then they have found themselves. (IA11)

Students think counselling is helpful to support them in choosing study which will be of interest and in preventing drop out. However, their discussion revealed a certain pattern of discourse, with Student 9 commenting that the traditional study programmes are emphasised over other programmes:

> When you apply, in tenth grade, then it is, actually, just introduced to you - natural science, social science and you can choose between these schools. You know, I never heard of any sports study programmes or cosmetology study programme, or [anything] like that. (IA9)

Student 10 also reported a significant change in how schools introduce themselves, "because now they are introducing much more, you know, the extra-curricular activities"[21] (IA10).

Interviews with parents and students also revealed the existence of certain beliefs which can influence a student's choice of study. As one student put it, "Some parents think that if you don't finish the matriculation, then you will never be able to attend university - you have no future." (IA9). Parents themselves also discussed how students seem to be directed towards certain subjects rather than others:

> It is like the discourse, the culture in the society, you hear this, [study] business and be an engineer, be a lawyer, but I don't see how it is lifting the arts study programmes or vocational study programmes. (IA13)

This quote from parent 13 highlights how there seems to be a hierarchy of study and jobs, with some study routes believed to be better for students than others.

Prominent in parents' discussion was another pattern of hierarchy which is also believed to influence a student's choice of school:

> We know which schools are highly selective and, where it is saying that you must get 9.8 to get in, ... then you have set certain, like, social structures, and all the other schools have become suddenly like trash categories. [...] and if you are going to get some success in this and that field, then you go to these schools, but not the other schools. And then the kids just have some anxiety and problems because they don't get into this school, and then the parents themselves are pressuring them to get into these schools, [because] they naturally want their kids to be more successful. (IA13)

The quote from parent 13 shows how the popularity of the highly selective schools has created a hierarchy where the highest schools are those with stronger academic students. As the highly selective schools can only admit a certain number of students, this has led to competition between students about which schools they can enter.

[21] When students speak of extra-curricular activities, they are referring to activities offered by the school, such as events, competitions, and clubs, which are typically organised by the student councils within each school.

6.1.4 The new policy in relation to school leaders' and teachers' working environment

The school leaders and teachers raised various issues related to the policy on school autonomy and its implication for their working environment. Prominent themes were leadership and opposition to changes and teachers' responsibility and need for support.

Leadership and opposition to changes

The policy on school autonomy has led to a change in the school leader's role, with increased responsibility for leading changes in the education offer. The head teacher of School A described how he experienced his agency within the school to make changes was, to some extent, limited:

> Then we just insert this decision making about how much shall be taught in each subject, and so on, into the institutions and that can be administratively problematic, especially where the management is very weak. (IA1)

He explained what he meant by 'weak management': "this heavy position to influence, to bring about changes in a system where the head teacher has little influence, and stakeholders, like teachers' associations and so on, actually control a lot" (IA1). As this quote reveals, making changes in the study programme offer and the specific subjects can be challenging, especially as changes which are considered to affect teachers' jobs and terms are likely to meet strong opposition from teachers and their associations. Another challenge seems also to have been the democratic process whereby the departments themselves were to come up with the changes, combined with the cut that was needed because of the requirement to shorten the study time for matriculation. The assistant head teacher described how "it was supposed to make a three-year study programme out of the four-year programme, and then they [the teachers] started to take the free selection out." (IA2). The curriculum manager also talked about teachers defending their jobs and their subjects:

> It built on [the fact] that people with a certain education wanted to secure their jobs; the curriculum is slightly written [in a way] that matches teachers' education, the subjects naturally, the classrooms, the facilities, … and this belief that their subject is the right one, it just had to have all this Icelandic, all this English and this Maths, and […] they felt that nothing could fall out, so the autonomy became nothing, in fact, because we didn't catch it. (IA3)

This quote reveals the challenge for school leaders in using increased school autonomy to make changes in the study programmes and, specifically, in the composition of

individual subjects. The challenge became even greater when the school also had to shorten the study programmes for matriculation.

On a more positive note, the head teacher reported that he experiences little interference from the MoE with his work, apart from the financial restraints:

> It was, of course, a restraint from the Ministry that one stayed within the financial criteria, but, otherwise, people were not interfering; there were, of course, these regular meetings where you tell what you are doing and it was usually just support - nobody was twisting your arm. (IA1)

The head teacher would, however, have liked more support with quality management:

> I would like it if I got the support to make things like indicators for performance, [...] this registering in INNA,[22] is somehow ... I have the feeling the information is different between schools, [and] this needs to be fixed; we just need much more help to do this, we do not handle this well. I have been interested in quality management since I came here, [but] I feel like I am still at the same starting point as in the beginning. (IA1)

This quote reveals a belief that the central database for registering student's information is inaccurate, something which affects the school's ability to make use of statistical performance indicators as part of its quality management. On a related theme, the head teacher was supportive of standardised tests and thinks there is a need for some control in parallel with school autonomy:

> Like quality control, also for the students and the people in the country to know that this is similar between schools, that students know where they stand. It is, naturally, a little bit special that schools decide both the teaching material and teaching and the testing and that there is no [external] control. (IA1)

Then there was the issue of policy stability. This was raised by the members of the School Board, with Member 16 pointing out that governments through the years have alternately been increasing or decreasing centralisation on the education offer:

> Before 2000 there were x many study programmes; after 2000 it was reduced again - now it is supposed to be increased again ... then maybe why should you bother have finishing, if you have put all this work into changing everything, and then everything just changes again. (IA16)

[22] Central database where all upper secondary schools register information on their students. The database is run by a private company under contract to the Ministry of Education.

This indicates that school leaders themselves might be reluctant to make many changes because of frequent changes in the government's policies. The risk is that a lot of work might be of little use if new policy initiatives are introduced which go in the opposite direction.

Teachers' responsibility and need for support

When School A started the curriculum work again in 2015 teachers within each faculty were assigned to revise the study programmes and the course units. Teacher 5 described the process as democratic: "The group worked together, and this was very demographic: we got a delimited task which all of us then discussed in a larger group and came up with a common conclusion." (IA5). However, because of the cuts, there was no professional management at that time for the various academic and art subjects.

> We are a bit dissatisfied about this today … everyone is supposed to be on the floor, and we are supposed to work on this together somehow, but there is maybe always a need for some control and [someone] to delegate … … if it is not a professional manager, then it just works out like that; someone takes on a lot of work that he is not getting paid for. (IA6)

Teacher 6 think that some control is needed, both regarding the implications for teachers' professional work and because of the extra workload involved in when making changes to the study programmes. Teacher 4 also explained how teachers needed more support and how scope for leadership and management is needed when implementing changes:

> This calls a bit for the school, or the school leaders, to support teachers when one wants to go for changes. [...] This involves a huge amount of work, and there are no people here; there is one curriculum manager, a head teacher, an assistant head teacher, a financial manager, [but] there is no one here in a job within the school to take care of this, so this is enormous stress on school leaders, and they are throwing the ball over to teachers, so that I sense enormous tiredness. (IA4)

This quote highlights the challenge of limited resources within the school. The school's governing body had been reduced to save money at the same time as more leadership and support was needed. More responsibility was therefore given to the teachers in the process of change, and the result was extra stress and tiredness both among school leaders and teachers.

Part of the challenge for the academic teachers was the shortening of the study programmes from four years to three, and their concerns about how this would affect students. In this regard, Teacher 5 commented that:

> People are insecure about letting go, people look to other schools and say, we cannot omit this, we must do [things] like they do … we cannot do it to the students, to omit this. Also, it follows us that students often move between schools, and we are always running into 'Wait, why are the course units so different, he just gets nothing evaluated. (IA5)

The quote reflects a certain insecurity when it comes to being responsible for changes. Teachers seem to feel a significant responsibility to the many students who move between schools, and Teacher 4 thinks increased autonomy calls for more cooperation between teachers in different schools:

> I think they are afraid of taking this the whole way, I would have been, … you need to have a conversation - you cannot just be alone in one upper secondary school, cannot decide how all biology looks like. (IA4)

Teacher 6 is also concerned that increased diversity in subjects and study assessment between schools might impact the publication of teaching material:

> This has a bit more to do with the teaching material, especially in subjects like maths and science, … Around 2008, there were textbooks in use, I think and admit afterwards, that controlled a bit too much how one organises the course units and how one teaches. They tried to translate very good books, this was just a bit of competition because if there were not enough schools that taught then there was no base, […] there was naturally a framework for these … three subjects, so we knew what was supposed to be there and [to] put it into these several boxes there. But people do it differently between schools [now] and some have tests and some have formative assessment, and then the requirements for textbooks and materials become like different, so I think that it has just become very difficult to issue textbooks. (IA6)

This quote from teacher 6 suggests the smaller market has made it difficult to come up with new teaching materials and that increased school autonomy is believed to make it even more challenging. This situation has also raised issues about the quality of teaching materials, as Teacher 6 noted:

> I think most schools are … one takes some old book, then you are maybe using 50% of it and then one is creating a booklet on this topic. I have seen that many do this very well, but this is just taken from this and that book. […] I am afraid that this has become worse, because we just know that there is neither time nor money or [anything] else to do all these papers. (IA6).

The quote shows how teachers must find and organise teaching materials from different sources themselves when there is a shortage of teaching materials. However, due to their limited resources, this might lead to the use of lower quality teaching material.

Teacher 7 would have liked more initiatives and participation with the economy and not least the occupational council. "We have always called for it, but it has never, never been an initiative, … they have come up with comments, but it has not been much." (IA7).

Teachers 5 and 6 shared similar view on their responsibility for preparing students for university study. Like the head teacher, they think some kind of standardised tests could help students to know where they stand before they start university; however, they believe most people have a different view:

> I think most people are a bit against standardised testing, maybe the main reason is that they have been controlling too much and then actually reduced the autonomy of schools. […] [However,] you must still always have some aims, and you also want to know … at university, one has started preparation courses in certain subjects because they are getting many students … and it turns out that many of them do not have the basics in maths. I think it is alright to have some standardised reference tests, or something, so one can just actually take the test and to be able to say afterwards that if I do not pass this test, then I do not have a good enough base. (IA6)

In contrast to academic study programmes, there are still standardised tests for the certified trades. After students graduate from school and have finished their workplace training, they must apply for the 'journeyman's examination' which leads to professional rights for the various trades. This examination has an impact on what is taught in the certified trades programmes, and vocational teacher 8 highlighted how teachers "are preparing them [students] for that, and the master craftsman continues the role of preparing them for it." (IA8). However, according to vocational teacher 7, there are advantages and disadvantages to the standardised nature of the exam:

> It is the same journeyman's examination over the whole country and taken at the same time, [so] there, the schools can see how they stand to a certain extent. […] The problem is maybe with the journeyman's examination, and I think most people agree, that it is not checking what is being taught in the workplace - it is checking what the schools are teaching them. (IA7).

This quote reveals the view that the journeyman's examination should be more focused on what students learn from their workplace training rather than from their schools.

6.1.5 The new policy and changes for students

The interviews revealed three themes relating to what the policy on school autonomy might or might not have accomplished for students. The first is based around how school leaders and teachers reported insignificant changes in the content of courses on offer. The second relates to students' and parents' perspectives on diversity and the quality of study, and the third addresses the dominance of shortening the study time for matriculation from four to three years.

Insignificant changes in the study content

Teachers in academic studies reported that there had been little change in the content of courses already on offer and little introduction of new courses. For example, Teacher 5 commented that: "The content, it was moved back and forth, some was omitted but actually [there was] no fundamental change" (IA5). Instead, it seems that the main work has been to align the current content of courses to the framework of the new National Curriculum Guide:

> Actually, all the work just went to fitting into these boxes, which were actually already there a bit; we were not developing any new course units, not as far as I know. (IA6)

A vocational teacher also reported that there has not been much change to his study programme, except that the size of the courses has been reduced:

> There has not been much change by us, as we said, 'This is good, [so] why change it?' [...] We meet rather regularly, subjects' teachers from all over the country and discuss, ... it is just these large courses we have been changing, to split them into two. (IA7)

School leaders similarly reported that the review of the study programmes had not led to many changes, and the actual changes are perceived by them as insignificant:

> There are, on the one hand, the academic studies, and, on the other hand, the vocational study programmes; they all assume that the student starts his education with a substantially better preparation than many of the students seem to have when they come here to the school, so, it can be said, that we have not used this autonomy to meet their needs - we have just rewritten what previously existed. (IA1)

The head teacher's biggest concern seems to be that the policy on school autonomy has not been used to accomplish more for students who have difficulties with their learning. However, by contrast, Teacher 4 considers the upper secondary programme provides effective support to students who need more preparation before going into other study programmes; however, while this short programme can lead to completion of studies, it does not in itself lead to any rights:

> It is a two-year study programme, and it works very well, and it is just unbelievable what happens, we are graduating them [students] from it, but few of them want to quit there because it does not give them anything. (IA4)

The curriculum manager's main concern is students with weak backgrounds at home who have, in fact, already dropped out at elementary level:

> Some have enormously poor learning ability - we are doing fine in helping them because somehow, we have what we need to do it, but the kids who have weak backgrounds and just dropped out of school in grade eight in elementary school, we are getting worse with those and we don't know why - they somehow stop so short. (IA3)

However, he believed that the provision of a new open study programme made it easier for some students to finish their matriculation:

> Then we pulled them over to the open study programme, and they utilise everything that they have finished, each and every course, but [they] can take it a little bit easier and finish matriculation from the open study programme … these are kids who have been here six or seven year or something. (IA3)

This quote from the curriculum manager shows how some students have been struggling for years to reach the matriculation. The open study programme, with lot of free selection, gives students more scope to choose courses suited to their learning ability and interests.

Students' and parents' perspective on diversity and quality of study

Overall, students think they have a diverse choice of study programmes and schools. They named the largest comprehensive schools in the capital, including School A, listed the education offer, and reported, "It is just almost everything" (IA11). Students also highlighted the flexibility of the school system: they can change study programme after they start, and they can also change school: "What is just very good with this comprehensive system is that you can start in one study programme and go to another study programme whenever you want" (IA9). However, if students move from a comprehensive school to a highly selective school, they may not have all their courses evaluated. "I think you get very little evaluated if you go from a comprehensive school, you know, over to School xxx and School xxx because they have classes" (IA9).

Upmost in parents' minds when discussing their children's choice of School A was the support it provides students with their studies. Parent 14 described how she had been for years "in a certain fight with the school system," because her son "is not the kid who fits into the box":

> I tried as much as I could to steer him into this school, because School A has a reputation of being, like, a multicultural school - this is, of course, also the neighbourhood - they have had to deal with all kinds of problems, and they have done it and they have the solutions. (IA14)

This quote shows how the focus in School A on supporting students with different needs and backgrounds has become part of the school's reputation. The school's policy on formative assessment is also believed to be better for student wellbeing. Anxiety and stress related to tests were especially high in the minds of parents and students:

> I can speak for me and very many friends - this has totally saved me, to be able to just work projects ... having that assessed, and then, if you get over seven or eight, then you don't have to take a final test. (IA10)

Students reported that there are not many final tests, "there are mainly just final tests in the main courses like mathematic and Icelandic and natural science" (IA11).

The dominance of shortening of study time for matriculation

The shortening of the study time for matriculation from four years to three was also a key theme for students and parents. Students experienced the shortening of the study programmes as the main change in the education offer: "These changes are entirely due to this change which focused on the length of study, you know ... everything has been compressed" (IA11). However, students believe that the most compression has been in the core subjects: "What I think has been most compressed, it is these core subjects, ... so that students are maybe under more pressure in maths and Icelandic" (IA11). Students reported that the increased workload has reduced time for other extra-curricular activities; for example, Student 10 reported that this has meant some first-year students "hardly participate, just want to hurry up with their study" (IA10), and another commented that, "participation in extra curriculum activities is collapsing with this three-year system" (IA9). Students also think that their scope for free selection might have been reduced: "There is maybe less scope for, like, going into some electives" (IA9). However, Student 11 highlighted the fact that it is already possible for students in elementary school to start to take some compulsory course units for upper secondary school, and this could be a way to keep the scope for diverse choice at upper secondary level:

> Students can take some academic course units in elementary school ... so they have finished certain upper secondary school courses when they get there in the first term which is naturally very good because then they have more scope for the free selection. (IA11)

However, within the comprehensive schools there has always been flexibility in the length of study time for graduation, and this has not changed despite the fact that the study time for matriculation has been shortened. As Student 10 pointed out, "One can actually, like within quotation marks, take this at your own pace" (IA10).

6.1.6 Summary

Findings from the case study of School A raise various issues. The first overarching theme on how participants interpreted school autonomy from policy documents suggests contrasting and mixed messages. On one hand, the rhetoric of the new law was perceived as granting schools freedom to make changes. On the other hand, the bureaucracy of the National Curriculum Guide was interpreted by most participants as limiting school autonomy. Furthermore, the requirement to shorten study programmes for matriculation was experienced as contrary to the freedom which had already been given to schools.

The second main theme was on the impact of contextual factors on policy enactment in the school. Findings revealed divided views in the professional context on what the school's policy on changes should be. These divisions interacted with various other factors in the school's context, and, together, they impacted the policy making in the school. These related, among others, to how much choice students should have, students' preparation for university, the composition of the student body, the status of the school, and the transparency of students' study in the certified trades. The financial framework was another prominent factor which had an impact on policy enactment in the school. Findings revealed how the unchanged financial framework meant that scope for new courses and study programmes depended on an increase in the overall number of students or on dropping other courses instead. Furthermore, changes in the offer and content of vocational studies depended on new housing and finance for machines. The third contextual factor was students' demand for school and study. This factor is linked to the school's finances where scope for diverse study programmes depends on the number of students choosing these programmes. However, many students are believed to be uncertain about their choices when they start upper secondary school. Prominent too was how hierarchies of schools, study and jobs are considered to influence students' choice in ways which lead to a more homogeneous choice of study.

The third theme was on the new policy in relation to school leaders' and teachers' working environment. School leaders assumed increased responsibility for leading changes in the study programmes offered; however, the main challenge in their working environment in School A seems to have been teachers' opposition to change. From the teachers' perspective, factors such as the evaluation of study between schools, the quality of teaching material, and how best to prepare students for university study seem to have impacted how they experience their responsibility, and thus the extent to which they used their autonomy to make changes in the content of subjects and courses. The findings also reveal an increased workload for both school leaders and teachers and a desire for more support, professional management, and cooperation in parallel with increased autonomy.

The fourth theme was on the new policy and the changes it brought for students. Findings revealed that school leaders and teachers experienced insignificant changes in the content of courses and study programmes on offer in relation to the policy on school autonomy. However, students still think they have a diverse choice of study programmes and schools, and interviews with parents suggest that School A has a good reputation for supporting students with different needs. Both parents and students also highlighted how they find the school's policy on formative assessment better for students' wellbeing than summative assessments. Finally, students think the main changes have been due to the shortening of the study period for matriculation rather than the autonomy policy.

6.2 Case study of School B

School B is in Reykjavík. The number of students is close to the average for upper secondary schools in the country (DB1), and most come from the various neighbourhoods of the capital (DB2). The school has a long history as a successful academic school which prepares students for university and currently offers two study programmes for matriculation: natural sciences and social sciences (DB2). From its inception, the school has operated a traditional class-based system with four-year study programmes for matriculation. Within this system, students stay together as a class the whole time. This contrasts with the now more common comprehensive system in Icelandic upper secondary schools where students have more control over their speed of study. Instead of following a class, students can choose their own way through study programmes and subunits as long as they complete the relevant precursors. School B is in high demand, and it can therefore be highly selective when it comes to intake. Students with higher grades in Icelandic, English and Maths from elementary school are a priority (DB5).

The content of this subchapter is divided into several sections. The first focuses on the findings from analysis of documents and provides insights into the enactment of policy on school autonomy in School B and the challenges in the process of change. As with School A, these documents included an Annual Report, an external evaluation, internal reports, and details of admission requirements and processing of applications. A full list of the documents from School B can be found in Appendix 2, and anonymised details of the study participants are provided in Appendix 1. The four main themes which emerged from analysis of the interviews are explored in the remaining sections.

6.2.1 Policy enactment and challenges in the school's context

School B had already initiated a process of change before the new law on increased school autonomy was established in 2008. In the school's 2018 report, where the story of the changes is traced, it is clear that most of the staff had concluded by the early 2000s that its well-established class-based system did not allow for the flexibility needed

to meet different students' needs (DB3). Drop out had increased and more students struggled to meet the requirements of the school curriculum. Thus, in 2005, a decision was made to transform the school. School leaders were aware from the beginning that changing a school with a deeply rooted culture and traditions would be challenging, and that, despite beliefs that change was needed, the school's prevailing "conservatism" was likely to be the largest barrier (DB3):

> Transforming School B would be challenging because it was an old and well-established institution where many employees did not know any other working environment except to a small extent. Our biggest barrier would actually be our own conservatism. (DB3)

The outcome of the policy work at that time is covered in the school's report to the MoE in 2010 (DB4). A new more flexible cyclical curriculum was designed, where the school year would be divided into four terms; however, students would still be in some classes and subjects throughout the whole school year. The new curriculum meant that the traditional separation between teaching time and testing at the end of each school term would disappear and emphasis would instead be on project-based learning. This required changes in teachers' working time and called for new teaching practices. With agreement from the MoE, the school was ready to test the new curriculum in the autumn of 2010. However, this trial never took place, as the school leaders failed to reach agreement with the Teachers' Union about payments and terms for teachers working within the new cyclical system (DB4).

The school, therefore, had to stop plans to test the new curriculum and continue with the older system. The school's report in 2018 highlights how this situation affected morale within the school:

> Many years of work had been put on ice and the backlash was huge. Disagreement arose in the staff group; no one was happy but opinions differed on the causes of the stranding … perhaps the school had underestimated the resources needed to enact the changes. (DB3)

The next few years became even more demanding. Along with the dispute over teachers' salaries, there were cutback in schools due to reduced public spending following the financial crisis in 2008. However, in 2014 two things happen which prompted School B to start again. The government and the Teachers' Union reached a new agreement on more flexibility for schools to organise their work, and schools were pressured to shorten study time for matriculation to three years. This period was described in the report as follows:

> The years after 2010 were marked by large cuts in financial contributions to upper secondary schools. In School B, like other schools, there was obvious tension and conflict due to the stress that followed the situation. It can be said that the cut off period ends with the teachers' strike and a

> revolutionary collective agreement in the spring of 2014. The agreement created a positive atmosphere for change. After the agreement, irreversible pressure was imposed on schools to adopt a three-year matriculation. This decision was controversial and there was a lot of discussion about the role of the upper secondary school and the value of studying for a matriculation. A decision on a three-year matriculation clearly became the impetus that pushed the process to start again in School B. (DB3)

The new teachers' agreement enabled the school to take advantage of the autonomy gained from the new upper secondary education act in 2008. In addition, while the requirement to shorten the study time for matriculation became controversial, it created the pressure which school leaders needed to restart the plan to change the school. However, at the time when the school was working on its policy, another demanding task was also ongoing. The external evaluation report of 2014 highlights a construction project to extend the school which started in 2013 and was due to be completed in 2015. School B had long been waiting for a renovation of its old housing; however, the construction work led to the temporary movement of teachers and students to other buildings with an associated increase in workload and disruption to schoolwork (DB2).

School B's second attempt to implement change led to a new student-centred curriculum, which has been described as the most radical innovation in Icelandic upper secondary education since the idea of the comprehensive system was first implemented in 1972 (DB3). The school moved away from the centralised class-based system entirely to a new cyclical curriculum where each term was now divided into three parts. The flexibility of this system allowed students to study at their own pace and to have more choice of specialisation within the study programmes. The pedagogy strategy of the new curriculum became *building learning power*, with a focus on students' engagement and responsibility for their learning. At the same time, the structure of the study programmes was reduced to three years in accordance with the MoE's requirement to shorten study for matriculation (DB3). However, the two study programmes remained divided along traditional lines into natural and social sciences. The main changes are summarised in the school's annual report 2017 as follows:

- new study programmes aligned with societal changes;
- new subjects added to the core of the study programmes;
- changed and partly increased university level requirements – depth kept in core subjects;
- students given much more control over the composition and duration of their studies;
- changes in pedagogy and assessment (DB1).

School B started to teach according to a new revised school curriculum in the autumn of 2015. The new cyclical system was implemented the year after and ran alongside the

old class-based system until the last students graduated from the old system in 2018 (DB3). Overall then, despite difficult obstacles in the external environment and conflicts within the school, school leaders managed to bring in radical changes.

6.2.2 Participants' interpretation of messages from policy documents

Two policy documents became prominent in participants discussion on how they perceived the policy on school autonomy: The Upper Secondary Education Act no. 92/2008 and the National Curriculum Guide 2011. In addition, participants highlighted the requirement to shorten the study time for matriculation which was supposed to be completed in autumn 2015. In this section, the participants' interpretation of the main messages from these policy documents are explored and the way the shortening process affected their experiences is considered.

The Upper Secondary Education Act 2008

School leaders in School B described increased school autonomy as an important policy for schools to adapt to changes in society and meet students' different needs. The members of the School Board spoke of the policy ideology and its advantages compared to the former centralised curriculum:

> Different schools can [now] set different policies and then there is more choice for young people when they are thinking about what they want to do in the future, so that it is not like you are all just going down one state route. (IB16)

School Board members also described their participation in policymaking for School B. Changes are discussed within the Board, but the initiative and ideas on changes come from within the school and "have been led by the head teacher and the school's staff." (IB15).

The head teacher highlighted how for School B the policy had both to do with the authority to change the structure of the class-based system and to develop subjects in line with societal changes:

> So, the system was good for those who fitted 100% into it and very bad for the others, and we did not have much authority to change [...] The study subjects and their structure were decades old, made in a society [which is] nothing like the society we live in today. (IB1)

The head teacher further pointed out how she perceived the policy as trusting schools with school development. "The pros are naturally that, with this, the schools are trusted ... and they get the opportunity to tailor schoolwork towards [their] own ideology" (IB1).

Teachers described how their autonomy over the content of education within their teaching subjects had increased in practice. Teacher 5 gave an example from the

process of reviewing his subject: "it was totally in our hands to develop ... we teachers had full freedom" (IB5). However, most teachers also spoke of already having considerable autonomy. Teacher 8 explained that this was to do with the fact that there has traditionally been little interference from school leaders in teachers' work:

> I also used to have a lot of autonomy; [...] although there was some content in the former curriculum, my professional autonomy was considerable - how I worked from this ... there was no one watching it. (IB8)

By contrast, parents and students reported little or no involvement in the development of the education offer in School B. Parent 12 stated "I have not been called to the table [during] these two years I have been in the parent council"; she also pointed out that another parent has a seat on the School Board, "but nothing has come to us from there" (IB12). The students interviewed had not participated in policy making on changes in the study offer either. However, they also reported that they had started the school under the new system, beginning their studies just as the last students were finishing in the class-based system.

The National Curriculum Guide 2011

School leaders and teachers recalled various administrative and technical challenges related to the implementation of the National Curriculum Guide 2011. School leader 3 described how the issue of different course descriptions from each school caused "chaos" within the central curriculum. He thinks "the first units in the schools should have been more coordinated; it would have been a bit easier ... maybe not for the whole study but in the beginning" (IB3). Teacher 4 also mentioned that the different course descriptions have made it more complicated to evaluate students' prior study if they move between schools:

> I think all schools are doing their best to evaluate study between them, but this is very difficult - it is hard to figure out. We may have two different courses that teach this and that, but in the other school there is just one course which teaches both, and how is this to be evaluated? [...] It was a lot easier when you were just in STÆ203 – then if you had taken it elsewhere, you just got it evaluated. (IB4)

This quote shows how more diversity is seen as leading to less transparency in the evaluation of students' study, and, in many cases, an increased workload: "It needs a full-time job just for this, in my opinion." (IB4)

The curriculum manager recalled how it became his task to support teachers in implementing the competence-based approach proposed by the National Curriculum Guide:

> We tried to give general instructions on how these qualifications level were conceived and that the main line was through the levels, that this entailed students' real ability and competence. [...] We had, of course, to take care of the technicalities, that this would be, like, in the certain boxes. (IB3)

This support from the curriculum manager seems to have mattered for how teachers perceived the implementation of the National Curriculum Guide. In Teacher 8's words:

> I would say, there you rely a bit on the managers to guide us, because it can actually be said that you have not become that well acquainted with the laws and the National Curriculum Guide ... at least in my case. (IB8)

Teacher 8 went on to point out that implementation of the competence-based approach has led to more specific work on the aims of teaching plans; however, apart from that, her autonomy to organise teaching in this regard has not changed much:

> You just look now and again at the aims; we must, however, outline them more specifically now - what they are, this with knowledge and skills and competence - and it is just a good thing, in fact, we are going to, within next three years, implement that these goals in each project are specified. This task is to fulfil this goal and refer to the curriculum [the National Curriculum Guide]. (IB8)

As in School A, leaders in School B also highlighted how the central curriculum database and the administration acted as barriers when it came to utilising policy on school autonomy to make changes to study:

> The curriculum database itself was set up like that, that you had begun to believe it would control how we would organise study in the schools, which is actually crazy. The reality became different, we passed by this ... then just the system itself is an obstacle, because the public education system is tailored around an old base which is really changing very fast, just how people speak and word things in regulations and curriculum. [...] Submission of information to the Ministry and authority is based on this, the central database INNA [the system for students' registration] is designed around this ... the main issue here is just not giving up, just [that] we have the authority to be different. (IB1)

This quote from the head teacher suggests that several technical factors within the system have called for much perseverance in bringing about changes.

Teacher 5 highlighted that for autonomy to exist, the schools must be able to constantly review their curriculum:

> We have, of course, now finished developing a new school curriculum, but now the idea is also that it should be constantly evolving. However, there is still this incredibly long approval process for the courses and the study programmes, and the question is how this process can be sharpened, so this can be and happen faster, so it is actually possible to have the school curriculum in constant revision. Because if it is supposed to be in revision and it has to wait for several years until it will be accepted by the Ministry, then this is just a talk [...]. (IB5)

It seems that the long approval process for study programmes has provoked doubts in Teacher 5 about whether the schools have been given real autonomy.

The shortening of study time for matriculation

The requirement to shorten the study time for matriculation to three years became controversial among teachers and this affected the school's work on changes:

> There were lot of things which had been written and thought in such a class-based cyclical system ... then the demand for three-year matriculation was added to this, and then it was necessary to somehow combine the policy in the school and the three-year period. And, of course, it is like that with changes - it is not always easy to see where the resistance will be most and against what, whether it is against real change in the school or the three-year programme, or a combination of both. (IB3)

However, the head teacher thinks that when this decision came to shorten the study programmes, it was better that the schools had the freedom to do it by themselves. She thinks it would not have been good "if there had just been a centralised decision that some certain subjects or courses should fall out and everybody were to teach the same, because the older curriculum was incredibly centralised" (IB1). In fact, the demand that schools shorten the study time for matriculation helped leaders in School B to restart the process of change after it had stopped in 2010:

> Because a decision was taken to go for the shortening, then it pressed all schools to revise the curricula. [...] So, we utilised the opportunity and decided that since it was like this, then we should not, in our curriculum work, aim to defend the status quo, but we decided [instead] to examine how we want to be, and this, of course, required a lot more work and time. (IB1)

Thus the requirement to shorten study time for matriculation was also used as an opportunity to make more radical changes in the curriculum than simply reducing the length of existing courses.

6.2.3 The impact of contextual factors on policy enactments in school

Interviews revealed three prominent themes relating to how factors in the school's context influenced the enactment of policy on school autonomy over curriculum. The first one addresses professional beliefs and changes and describes school leaders' and teachers' views on changes in the school's curriculum. The second relates to financial obstacles and how these limit the school's scope for changes. The third covers students' choice and describes the characters of demand for schools and study from both students' and parents' perspectives.

Professional beliefs and changes

Discussion on the need for changes in pedagogy and moving away from the class-based system to a cyclical system had been evolving for some time in School B before the establishment of the policy on increased school autonomy. School leader 3 highlighted the role of an action research group in the school in bringing about changes:

> In the school [there] had been an action research group operating for a quite long time. In it was an incredibly powerful group of teachers who had been constantly thinking that they wanted to change teaching, and not just teaching, but also assessment and the idea of how it is to be a teacher in the class and how it is to be a student and how to let the pedagogy work. (IB3)

The fact that the school leaders had considerable experience is also believed to have been crucial for radical change to take place:

> I think it has helped that within the management team was an incredible ability to enact changes, so we all had much experience [...] we were advocates of change from different directions. (IB3)

Teacher 8 described how she experienced the rector [the head teacher] as having a vision for change from the very beginning of his career in the school:

> I think that there is a pretty strong influence. I don't remember how the timing was, [but] see we get a new rector ... she has a certain vision on things ... so it created, at least within the management team, pretty much a strong policy on changing the system here. (IB8)

The above quotes suggest that the work of the action research group and strong support from school leaders with changes has had a great impact on how policy on school autonomy was enacted in the school. This was also the opinion of the assistant head teacher, who explained that there had to be some forces for change within schools as the policy does not, in itself, lead to changes:

> I think, of course, the legal framework matters very much, but it also matters a lot that it is a tradition within the school, that there is some culture which calls then for some change as a result, because I think, it has given the other schools also much more freedom, and it is just so enormously different how it has been used. (IB2)

Although change agents among the teachers and school leaders within the school were in favour of change, others were more reluctant from the very beginning. Teacher 8 recalled when the school had to stop implementing changes because agreement with the Teachers' Union was not reached:

> I know that many people did breathe a sigh of relief. Wow, I do not need to go through these … changes. But others were very frustrated not to be able to implement the changes that they felt were necessary to strengthen the school's work. (IB8)

This quote indicates very divided views within the school. Teacher 8 explained that there were teachers who "did not believe that changes in teaching methods would result in any better success." (IB8), and Teacher 5 described how the strong culture and teachers' relationship to the school provoked grief when the school finally stopped being class-based:

> A large part of the teachers' group were also students here within this school, so we were raised by the school; we liked it very much and have completely kept the honour, the culture. But, we are now transforming and changing the culture with our new system, so it was blended with much grief when we said goodbye to the class-based system, but we were convinced that it was over; it was very good at that time, but it does not fit in a modern society, you know. The base of the study programmes and, like, the faith in the book, that comes from this foundation, this is School B - it is like, this faith in academic study has very strong roots here, you know. (IB5)

Despite aiming for radical changes in pedagogy and structure of study, School B decided to keep certain peculiarities of the existing study programmes, which continued to be natural science and social science programmes:

> We decided not to change the study programme names, in the work, and then it becomes like that we decide to keep the depth through four lines in the school which existed in the old class-based system. (IB3)

While the school kept depth in certain subjects, changes were made in the course offer within the study programmes: new courses were introduced and others taken out. However, these changes in the composition of subjects within the study programmes were disputed, as Teacher 7 explains:

> I just felt that the school's history and culture were a bit thrown away by this, … because here, for example, was a tradition for various things, such as considerable history teaching, considerable geological teaching, and these disciplines were just destroyed and new ones brought in. (IB7)

This quote reveals the impact of the school's history and strong tradition of teaching on opinions about what should be taught under the new system.

Financial obstacles

Prominent in school leaders' discussions were barriers related to finance, and the head teacher described the lack of funding for change as the main obstacle:

> The biggest obstacle in all of this is that schools are pushed into making changes by a change at the upper secondary school level as a whole. These changes have a cost, and these changes were not accompanied with finance for change, and sometimes it is necessary to invest without certainty, … this means that people are a bit alone and indifferent, actually, and if things do not go well, then people, of course, have to deal with it by themselves, and such, so this support is needed. (IB1)

All the school leaders spoke of the teachers' former collective agreement as another main obstacle to schools being able to exercise the increased autonomy granted by the upper secondary Act in 2008. The curriculum manager explained how their plans were affected:

> This ends in a total crash in 2010 because of collective bargaining issues. These were then settled in 2014 with the contracts, so that the problem that existed in 2010 was no longer the case, … if the collective agreements are really in a world that is decades old, then there is no benefit of freedom in the laws. (IB3)

This quote reveals how the collective agreement was not aligned with the flexibility which was built into the policy on school autonomy until 2014, an issue which led to School B had to stop its work over a protracted period.

Teacher 7 explained how the lack of funds for the school's plan to go for the changes at that time had implication for morale:

> Just the morale in the school, and other things, because then the money did not exist, but it [the school] was still supposed to go for change … because it was supposed to flatten out the separation between tests and teaching time, and it had been calculated that the teaching obligation needed to go down to 21 hours … but here the school offered teachers just 23 hours. […] With the wage contracts in 2014, then it was, of

> course, negotiated, this separation, [so] that these could be repealed. (IB7)

The assistant head teacher also raised the issue of the influence of the Ministry allocation model on the financing of the school:

> I think it is the operational form which calls somewhat for it, that as you get more students with better backgrounds, the less expensive it is teaching them, the better the school can then operate, and there are some schools that have better access to such students simply because the society says these are better schools. (IB2)

This suggests that while schools have been given more autonomy to better meet students' different needs and thereby reduce drop-out rates, the allocation model encourages them to recruit the more able students.

Two school leaders and one of the teachers spoke about how the design of the new extension was intertwined with the school's work on changing the course offer. The school got new rooms for arts and science subjects, the focus was on open spaces for students to study, and the overall design took into account the school's new ideas in pedagogy. Teacher 5 made the connection explicit:

> When that house was designed, ... then we had finished to take this decision, that is to change the curriculum and then to have arts subjects as compulsory and the prerequisite for us to do that was to get all these art subjects' rooms. (IB5)

The quote shows how changes in the course offer in some subjects depended on available housing, for example where space is needed for practical learning.

Students' demand for school and study

Two prominent themes emerged in relation to students' demands for school and study: students' uncertainty of choice and the influence of the school's reputation.

Interviews with students and parents revealed that most students are believed to be uncertain about their choice of study when they start upper secondary school (at age 16). Parent 13 highlighted this: "Some are determined that they are going to do something specific, some apprenticeships [...] [but] most teenagers, I think, do not know what they want to do when they get older" (IB13). The students consider that this has, to some extent, to do with their lack of prior experience. As Student 11 explained, "in elementary school one has not tried to go into all these subjects" (IB11), and students believe that more student-led introductions could help them. Student 10, for example, described the introduction he got in his elementary school:

> I found it matters whether one got a good introducer from the school, you know, a student who was in school [in School B] introduced School B, … naturally everything about the extra-curricular activities, the nearest mall, [...] and the mood in the school, and it somehow gets students to just think 'Wow, I would like to be there'. (IB10)

Students also spoke about their choice of the study programmes in School B. Student 11 did not know what he wanted to study but thought the natural science study programme would be a good choice because "it gives, like, the most possibilities rather than the social science study programme" (IB11). Student 10 was interested in vocational study but thought it would be better to finish the matriculation first, commenting, "If I would quit working in the craft … then I would have the matriculation and could go straight to university" (IB10). These quotes from students indicate that they consider it important that their studies give them good access to university.

Prominent in students' and parents' discussions was how their choice of school was influenced by the schools' reputation for demanding study, high grades, and extra-curricular activities. Their choice seems to have mainly been between four grammar schools in the capital, all of which are highly selective.[23] As Student 10 reported:

> They (students) all say, 'Oh no, I can't get into XXX, I need such high grades', and then comes a certain, like, fear of applying there. I applied for XXX, but it was because, see, I was going to put School B as first choice and XXX as second choice, but my mother told me that because there were higher grades in XXX, I should rather take the chance and put XXX first and School B second. (IB10)

This shows how students look at the popularity of the highly selective schools and try to evaluate where they can get in according to how high their grades are. This further indicates that students' grades from elementary school can, to some extent, limit their ability to choose a school. Parent 13 also noted that students' grades can limit both students' choice of school and study path:

> What hinders elementary children when they are taking this step is how well they have done in 10th grade, and their exams matter a bit [in terms of] which way they can choose and where they get in. (IB13)

[23] In contrast to most other schools, these highly selective schools do not offer pathways for students who do not fulfil the entry requirements for study programs for matriculation. There are still two class-based schools in the countryside; however, most other upper secondary schools are operating as comprehensive schools.

Students also highlighted the influence of a school's reputations of extra-curricular activities on their choice. This was believed to be one of the main reasons for choosing School B over the other highly selective schools: "When you ask students why they went to School B, then most say the extra-curricular activities" (IB10). All the parents spoke about how they think school reputation influences students' choice. Parent 13 described the effect on her son: "XXX and VVV, he was not interested in because the reputation was that the study was so difficult and demanding ... so the choice was between School B and YYY." (IB13). Parent 14 also spoke about the importance of students choosing study which would interest them:

> I would have liked to go much deeper into each school and what was being offered, but it rules so much, just the location and access, and, like, where friends are going also; and I think, like, the reputation of the school somehow. [...] We are always being reminding to choose the study that suits the children ... but what I thought, in the end, somehow determined my daughter was the reputation of the school - not the infrastructure. (IB14)

This quote, however, also indicates that a school's reputation might, in some cases, be more of a factor in a student's choice than selecting study which is suited to their needs.

6.2.4 The new policy in relation to school leaders' and teachers' working environments

Two themes emerged from analysis of the interviews with school leaders and teachers in School B on policy on school autonomy in relation to their working environment. These are leadership and managing change and teachers' responsibility and quality of study.

Leadership and managing change

Policy on school autonomy over curriculum has increased school leaders' responsibility for leading educational change. The curriculum manager described how the leaders in School B made decisions on changes in the offer of courses:

> We school leaders took the decision ... where we would cut down and such because we were starting new course units. [...] It is not fair and not normal, I find, that teachers themselves decide on that. (IB3)

However, managing change became demanding for school leaders. The head teacher recalled how the changes met opposition among teachers because of the impact on their job security:

> And then, when we decide to put study together for students, and some subjects are strengthened, it reduced the weight of others, and then we met obstacles among the staff; then people start to think, wait is my work in danger, and this opposition, it is not easy to address. (IB1)

The head teacher also recalled pressure from ministers and teachers' professional associations on what subjects should be taught:

> We saw ministers after the new law came in who declared that they thought some specific courses should be taught in upper secondary schools and that it should be compulsory, just because they are especially interested in that subject. [...] We found that the Ministry got pressure from stakeholders, when the schools write their own new curriculum, then it comes up this struggle regarding when people start to think what about me, the professional associations of individual teachers or subjects start to pressure the Ministry about the importance of teaching this and that and then it becomes important to remember why one was in change, what is the aim. (IB1)

Teachers' resistance created a challenging situation because school leaders needed at the same time to find a way to get them involved in the work of reviewing the study programmes. The curriculum manager explained how she believed teachers' ownership of the curriculum was of importance for the changes to happen:

> I thought that it would be enormously important that this would be their curriculum, about what they would like to do in their subjects; though they were very dissatisfied with what they got to teach, few courses, and that the changes would have considerable influence on their working environment. (IB3)

The school leaders' strategy became not to replace teachers as the rector thought this would be disruptive:

> Then it is one thing in this change management, it is that we were not going to replace staff, and the rector had this perspective that he wanted [the school] to sail through the changes with as little disruption in the staff group as possible. (IB3)

Nevertheless, all the school leaders described how the enactment of radical changes in School B disrupted schoolwork, increased workload, and had impact on the morale. The head teacher reflected on the overall changes:

> I am very pleased with these changes … however, we have also, of course, been through the winger with all staff, [and] that provokes

> disruptions, so it is necessary to bring a bit of calm around it all - it is not possible to go through radical change forever. (IB1)

School leaders also raised the issue of the need for support and feedback on the changes. The curriculum manager thinks head teachers need more support from the MoE in this respect:

> I think the greatest error in the system is that head teachers are isolated: they get two general meetings a year in the Ministry and there is no one there [who is] a specialist in school management, actually ... I think they are totally [an] island ... I think the head teachers' group needs support. (IB3)

The head teacher emphasised the need for more external control, noting that "with freedom there also has to be some monitoring that what is done is what is said to be done," and that "this should be [done] by strengthening external audits." (IB1). This was also highlighted by the curriculum manager, who described how she experienced little policy monitoring from the central education authority:

> It could be that I, as a manager here in the school, would need to answer, 'What are you doing to strengthen students in learning and strengthen teachers in the teaching?' I don't feel like I am facing this question, and I am afraid it will get lost in the follow-up, [but this] ... is of course the main thing: how do I make students better students? (IB3)

The assistant head teacher, however, noted that it can be difficult to evaluate changes in the school regarding the quality of study without conducting long-term research:

> I think it is not unlikely that our students who started now, when they finish university, that they will have succeeded better than our students six years ago. But it is very difficult to say that it is because we have changed the system in our school; it can also be because we have got better students - you know there are a thousand variables. (IB3)

The curriculum manager also highlighted how schools need time for changes and curriculum development:

> Much of our time has, of course, gone into enacting the system change. [...] Now we start to think how we change the curriculum next, and we have [already] started the process, so that, that is exactly the freedom ... and I hope that it will not be turned off with some centralised destructive impacts. (IB3)

This quote from the curriculum manager suggests some concerns about political stability in the schools' working environment.

Teachers' responsibility and quality of study

Policy on school autonomy has increased teachers' responsibility over the content of their subject, and Teachers 8 explained how she thinks this has changed the teachers' working environment:

> It can be said that, at the same time, the responsibility within the school has increased, so we need to more careful when we are debating what should be taught, and how, and all that, because we cannot just say the Ministry told us to do this You know, this has come to us, we have to stand up for what we are doing and fall, if that is the case, and therefore the discussion inside about teaching methods and, just, everything that has to do with learning is important, and I think it is a change that has happened. (IB8)

The quote from Teacher 8 indicates an increased need for teachers' professional cooperation within the school. Teacher 5 emphasised that the policy means greater scope is needed for teachers to reflect on their own work:

> And give teachers better opportunity to assess their work by themselves; it is actually very much needed now, you know, for teachers to be able to work on, to develop, their own work, to be stronger professionals, then more scope is needed for teachers, it is just necessary. (IB5)

In contrast to most of his colleagues, Teacher 5 was in favour of standardised tests: "I am very supportive of them, but I am in a total minority within this school" (IB5). He explained how these tests could inform both teachers and students on where they stand:

> I just view this as certain restraint to get to know, for the schools, where their students stand compared to the other students … and this would also be good information for them [the students] to know their status. (IB5)

However, he also noted that, because of schools' freedom, it might be complicated to have standardised tests at the end of the students' study:

> Now, because we have got this freedom, … I think that it would maybe not be possible to have them in the end, but it could maybe be possible at the halfway stage. (IB5)

The three other teachers considered that standardised tests were in contrast to the policy due to their controlling effects. Teacher 7 explained that "if it [the tests] were ongoing, then this freedom would really not exist (IB7).

Prominent in the teachers' discussion was how the changes in the course offer impacted their work. Teacher 6 reported that his subject had been cut, "by half or one third." (IB6), and Teacher 8 described how her subject had been "taken out" of the

curriculum and partly combined with a new course. Therefore, she had to start to teach a different subject which was not his specialty. "I did not finish any degree in it, but [I] had some background, so this kind of opened the way into it" (IB8). Teacher 7 also described how free selection was reduced:

> It was all taken, ... it is part of the shortening. We had [something] like free selection, so I offered free selections of all kinds, ... courses about my interests. (IB7)

These quotes from the teachers reveal how changes in the course offer have led to less flexibility for some teachers to teach their speciality and subjects of interest. Nevertheless, most teachers interviewed described the policy as positive for school development and motivating for their jobs:

> The advantage is that we can bring in our ideas a bit, and what we are interested in, and what we think is best to reach the aims of the National Curriculum Guide. (IB8)

However, teachers also pointed to greater workloads. For example, Teacher 6 transformed the content of his teaching subject but experienced insufficient payment for the additional work:

> We are, of course, just doing this along with our teaching, so it is [placing] much more load on us, because one also wants to use this opportunity to make changes, but one does not get paid for it, one does not find that it is valued much, this contribution one brings. (IB6)

Prominent too was how teachers related their increased workload to a shortage of teaching materials:

> It has been awful lot of work doing this, revolutionising this by ourselves, and we have been writing and inventing material from here and there, and there is a terrible lack of teaching material, and it has become so old and outdated in many ways. (IB6)

Teacher 8 described the increased workload as leading to inefficiency and in contradiction to other more positive sides of the policy:

> On the contrary then, it is the danger in our small country that there is then no benefit from synergy, for having all the schools in the same, and there is, of course, the making of teaching material ... it is a huge job, and the risk is that this will dampen the interest soon. (IB8)

The above quotes suggest that the shortage of teaching materials, concern about their quality, and the workload involved in the preparation of new teaching material impacts how teachers view their potential to make changes in their subjects.

6.2.5 The new policy and changes for students

As in School A, three themes emerged from the interviews related to what the policy of school autonomy might or might not have accomplished for students. The first relates to more flexible study and new pedagogy, the second to students' and parents' perspective on changes in the school, and the third to the consequences of shortening the study time for matriculation to three years.

More flexible study and new pedagogy

The head teacher in School B considers that the changes made within the school have resulted in a better school for students:

> We have a school which is conceived for students, this was also what we aimed at. We have a school which is more flexible than before, we have a school that can respond if something happens in a student's life, so that they can slow down or add to or change field of interest. We are also reaching aims on reducing drop out much faster than we expected. (IB1)

The flexibility of the new system is also considered to have made it easier for students to get their study evaluated if they move to School B from other schools.

> Because we have this open curriculum where students can arrange their study rather well, it is easier for us to evaluate study from elsewhere. (IB1)

Nevertheless, as in School A, there is also the view that more diversity in courses has, in general, made it more difficult to evaluate students' study if they change school. This issue was raised by Teacher 6: "The disadvantage of this is perhaps that it is difficult to, there is no consistency between schools, so if students are moving between [them], then they can get into troubles." (IB6).

The new pedagogy, building learning power, is believed to be better for students' learning. Teacher 5 explained how this was meant "to get students to become more active and more responsible for their study and, also to give them a bit more freedom." (IB5).

However, according to the curriculum manager, the revision of the content of subjects and courses has led to varied degrees of change:

> The basic idea was to go through every subject and that all teachers would be involved in that task, to think is this a course like I want to have it for the future. [...] In some places this became a complete revolution while in other places there was no change ... or, like, very minor changes. (IB3)

The head teacher described how students who apply for School B "are in general rather strong students on paper, and, of course, it influences the study offer" (IB1). However, the school had also planned to offer shorter study programme for students

who do not meet the requirements needed to start the study programmes for matriculation:

> We worked all that out and have a report on how we would do it, a shorter study programme; [...] [however] the answer from the MoE was, when we asked for permission to start it, because such study actually cost proportionately more than the study programmes for matriculations, the answer was that we would not get the money, then we said, then we just wait until we get finance to start it. (IB1)

According to the head teacher, this shorter study programme had not been offered because the school did not receive enough funding.

Students' and parents' perspective on changes in the school

Again, as was the case in School A, all the students and parents interviewed believed that students already have a diverse choice of studies and schools. Students who know their field of interest are believed to be able to find a suitable study. Student 9 stated that, "there are actually a lot of schools with lots of different study programmes for those who have that interest" (IB9).

In parallel with increased formative assessment in School B, the emphasis was on students' attendance, engagement, and work at school. Both parents and students consider this arrangement much more manageable for students and better for their wellbeing. One parent spoke about their daughter's experience:

> She is very pleased with the school and the arrangement within the courses mostly, and she is not often bringing work home. She says, 'I just work at school and finish this within school time', and then there is this formative assessment, which suits her very well, ... I know that just this activity and the attendance framework - it is very good here also. (IB13)

Student 11 highlighted how these changes have increased students' options for study among the highly selective schools:

> I have been talking about the fact that highly selective schools have freedom to change. I think it is a good thing because it gives students more options, like what fits for them; like for me, formative assessment fits much better for me rather than final tests. I do not handle that well in the end, [I'd] rather just being continuously working on something. (IB11)

Students also told stories of stress and workload among their friends in other highly selective schools where students need to take large final tests:

> Just, when you wake up in the morning and look at social media, then you look and see that one of your friends is still up at five a clock, half past five, just studying; what is actually going on? (IB10)

The students also pointed out that they are all are different: "Not all do great in tests although they are good in learning" (IB10) and "some get anxiety and then they cannot really take large tests" (IB11).

Students consider the new cyclical system better for their learning compared to the class-based system. Student 11 explained, "I find it very comfortable because then I can concentrate more on each course" (IB11). Student 9 pointed out that fewer subjects at a time can also be demanding; however, it is also good to have more choice of courses towards the end of their studies:

> The focus is very much on maths and physics, and now I am in the seventh course [in maths] and the fourth in physics, which is demanding, to be in both at the same time, but when you have reached the third year, then the focus is more on the last terms, the last courses in what you want to learn, so there are many free selections that come in. (IB9)

Parents who can make a comparison with their own study in upper secondary school think the teaching methods have changed. Parent 13 reported how her daughter tells her about different projects, "like both traditional and untraditional, so I find there is some development" (IB13). Parent 12 also spoke of similar changes in students' study: "it is somehow more open, and then this collaborative learning, that is something I have the feeling that the school is going more into, to let them work together on projects" (IB12). Parents also think the content of education has changed and relate it to new subjects. "It is just these subjects, democratic consciousness, and environmental sciences … gender studies, it is teaching young people much more to be active citizens." (IB13). However, in some subjects the content is not thought to have changed much through the years:

> My daughter was doing statistics the other day, and I ran down to our storage area and got the most organised notes in the world, that I still keep many years later, and we could read about some scales and all, just in statistics by [author's name], but there is a new book [version] but you know, it is just basically the same book; it has been developed, but we were able to use the old notes. (IB14)

Students think that the changes made in School B have influenced the school's reputation. Student 10 reported, "also just, the reputation for School B is extra-curricular activities, easy learning; it is just the reputation for the school (IB10). Student 9 explained that this is because some students in other highly selective schools believe that taking fewer subjects at a time within the cyclical system is easier:

> I think, because one hears often that ZZZ kids and YYY kids often say that School B is such an easy school - the learning here. I think, however, that it is not easier; these are same 100, 200, 300 courses in maths, just you have more concentration for each course. They are in 12 course units at the same time … and, therefore, they think that this is so easy. (IB9)

Student 11, however, believes that School B has become more popular because of the recent changes: "School B was not the biggest school before, [but] now it is just one of the most popular schools in the country" (IB11).

The consequences of shortening study time for matriculation

As in School A, the shortening of the study time for matriculation from four years to three had an impact on students' study. The curriculum manager explained that the decision of the MoE that the units required for matriculation should be 200 was not actually equivalent to shortening the study time from four years to three as, according to the National Curriculum Guide, three years' study would be equivalent to only 180 units of students work:

> The idea was to go down to 180 credits in this new system and then this would have been a pure three-year change, but it is not a three-year change - students are taking more than three years study according to the basic definitions. (IB3)

This quote from the curriculum manager indicates that the shortening has led to a greater workload for students. Student 9 thinks the study has been to some extent compressed: "The years have been reduced, and they had to put more in and throw away something else, not as important, from that course, so this is much more compressed and constant" (IB9). He also thinks the school has reduced single courses which are not part of a longer line in a specific subject. "It has been reducing, like, the extra courses and narrowing them to the courses we have been choosing; that is maths and physics for me" (IB9). However, despite the above changes, students reported neither more workload nor increased anxiety because of more compressed study:

> I do not find that much load in School B; in School B, it is a bit the option, if you work hard in school then you do not have to do much at home. It just depends on how well you do your study. (IB11)

The careers adviser, however, reported a different experience:

> These are many factors, but the shortening did have an influence; the study was compressed, and it is more intensive study, … therefore students have less time to be kids. […] Some of them do not handle the daily agenda in the school, the hobbies, because it is always said that they

> must be in sports … and take part in extra-curricular activities and to have family time … so that there is a lot of anxiety. (IB4)

While many factors are at play, the careers adviser thinks the shortening of the study time for matriculation has led to more workload among students and thereby more anxiety.

6.2.6 Summary

Findings from the case study of School B raise several issues. The first overarching theme on how participants interpreted school autonomy from policy documents indicates mixed messages. While the policy on increased school autonomy was interpreted as trust and opportunity to enact an already initiated process of change, participants experienced various administrative and technical barriers related to the implementation of the National Curriculum Guide. The pressure on schools to shorten study time for matriculation was, however, believed to have helped school leaders in the process of change.

The second overarching theme on the impact of contextual factors on policy enactment revealed three prominent factors. Firstly, how teachers' professional belief in the changes and the school leaders' vision had a great impact on the change process. Findings indicate that part of the teachers' resistance can be explained by influence from the very strong traditions of schooling. Secondly, financial obstacles had a great impact on the school's scope for change and the process itself. The main barriers related to the shortage of funding and the teachers' collective agreement. The third influencing factor in the school's context was students' demand for school and study. Findings here suggest, to some extent, disparity between policy aims on meeting students' different aims and needs and the reality surrounding students' choice, especially when many students appear to be uncertain of their choice of study when they start upper secondary school. Prominent also was how students who choose School B seem to choose between four highly selective schools and how the schools' reputation for demanding study and extra-curricular activities is influencing their decision.

The third overarching theme on the new policy in relation to school leaders' and teachers' working context revealed various challenges. The policy on school autonomy has increased school leaders' responsibility for leading changes in the study offer, and the findings suggest that managing change has been a greater challenge because of teachers' resistance and the impact on their job security. School leaders also highlighted the need for further support and feedback on the changes made. The policy on school autonomy has also increased teachers' responsibility over the content of their subjects; however, the findings indicate concerns related to the quality of study. Teachers also highlighted an increased need for cooperation and scope to reflect on their work. Changes in the course offer have led to less flexibility for some teachers to

teach their speciality; nevertheless, teachers consider the policy as motivating for their work. However, their workload has increased, and some teachers reported concerns due to a shortage of suitable teaching material.

The fourth theme was on the new policy and changes for students. Changes made in School B are believed to be in line with students' aims and needs. The study has become more flexible, and students have more choice. Various changes have been made in the content of study, however, these have varied by degree across subjects. Students and parents experience the school's focus on students work at school and on formative assessment as having made the study more manageable. Some students think the changes have led to the school getting a reputation for easy learning; however, they also highlighted that it has become one of the most popular schools. And, despite belief that the shortening of study programmes has led to more compressed study, the students interviewed did not report experiencing a greater workload or more stress and anxiety.

6.3 Case study of School C

School C is in a small village far from the Reykjavík area. The main industry in the region is fishing and related industries; however, tourism has been rising in recent years. There are several other small villages and towns in this part of the country, but transport can be difficult in winters due to the local geography. Population levels in the villages and the wider rural area have remained similar or, in some cases, declined in recent decades (Statistics Iceland, 2020c). School C was founded after the establishment of the Act in 2008, and is, therefore, among the youngest upper secondary schools in Iceland at the time of writing. The idea of an upper secondary school in the area had been evolving for some time (DC11). Although students in the surrounding villages had previously had the option of taking the first year of their upper secondary study in departments run by local elementary schools,[24] most moved away from home to study in the largest town, and this caused a number of issues (DC11). Indeed, a key element of the parliamentary proposal for a new school was the desire to reduce high drop-out rates among students who moved away by enabling them to stay in their home area until they reached the age of majority at 18 (DC12). The school's study offer has, from its foundation, mainly been programmes for matriculation, but it also offers an upper secondary study programme for students who want to reduce their study period or need more preparation for further study, and a programme for disabled students (DC4).

[24] Law no. 56/1965 amended the existing law to enable the first year of grammar school to be taught in local elementary schools, where the number of students and other conditions made this viable (https://www.althingi.is/altext/85/s/pdf/0536.pdf).

As with the previous case studies, the content of this subchapter is divided into several parts. The first focuses on the findings from analysis of documents and gives insight into the enactment of policy on school autonomy in School C and the challenges of offering diverse study in a small school. The documents span the period from 2010-2018 and include annual reports to the MoE, an external evaluation, self-evaluation reports, and school contracts. A full list of the documents from School C can be found in Appendix 2, and anonymised details of the study participants are provided in Appendix 1. In the sections thereafter, the four main themes which emerged from analysis of the interviews are explored.

6.3.1 Policy enactment and challenges in the school's context

In School C, the intention was to go in new directions from the very beginning. The annual report in 2011 states that the school's speciality is distributed learning and emphasis is placed on the use of information technology, diverse teaching methods, and formative assessment (DC1). However, the main challenge for School C was the small number of people in the local community which, as highlighted in the external report in 2014, can hinder diversity in schooling (DC5). Housing was also a challenge. In the school's contract with the MoE, it was assumed that the school would be able to take in 120 to 150 students (DC6), and the government rented housing for the new school from the local authority on this basis. However, this quickly became too small and lacked, among other things, canteens, a larger space for students, and better facilities for teachers. (DC2).

The contract with the MoE further stipulated that the school would operate according to the new Act from 2008 and would also incorporate the ideology of the new National Curriculum Guide, which was still in process at that time. Study programmes were to be set up in line with the new unit system and organised as 200 units. However, the fact that the school was new and, as such, was still developing its study programmes, was highlighted (DC6). The school's self-evaluation report two years later in 2012 stated that the aim was to provide a diverse study offer which would enable most students from the local community to find study suited to their needs (DC9). The appendix to the school's renewed contract with the Ministry for the years 2013 and 2014 defined this in more detail as follows:

The study offer during the contract period is diverse, so that:

- Students will find study suited to their needs (with an increased study offer);
- Students are independent, creative and can show initiative;
- Cooperation with other upper secondary schools will be established with the aim of strengthening the study offer [cooperation with four schools specified];
- Distance learning in environment and natural resources will be established [cooperation with three schools specified];

- Distance teaching will be obtained from VVV School [a school in Reykjavík] and others on courses where positions cannot be filled locally;
- The viability of the school's course offering is ensured by the inclusion of distance-learning students in the general day school courses (DC7).

The above show how the emphasis moved towards distance teaching and cooperation with other schools so as to offer more diverse study for students.

The school's contract with the Ministry for 2015 to 2019 had the same emphasis on cooperation and distance learning to enable the school to keep the study offer diverse; however, it also included new provision relating to contemporary projects addressing the "Status and future" of the upper secondary schools in the region which were "under the direction of the Ministry of Education" (DC8). In the school's self-evaluation report 2015 it becomes clear that part of this provision related to ideas of merging upper secondary schools in the region:

> It is inevitable to mention here the situation that arose during this operating year [2014-2015] around the issue of upper secondary schools in XXX [the region concerned]. Changes were announced by the Ministry of Education in the arrangement of schooling in the region. It was either talk of merging different upper secondary schools or collaboration. This definitely created unrest and uncertainty in the school's operation. It is not yet clear what the outcome will be, but now a committee is working on follow-up proposals. (DC10).

However, these proposals met strong opposition among locals, and this led to the Ministry dropping the idea (DC13). In addition, two years later, an important milestone was reached when the school got better housing. The school's annual report in 2017 notes that a "long-awaited extension" had been built with a canteen as well as facilities for meetings and students' extra-curricular activities (DC3).

Despite persistent challenges in the school's context due to the limited population in the area, School C has managed to grow and evolve. According to the school's annual report in 2018, the number of students reached 361 that spring, although about two thirds of these were distance-learning students and the majority lived outside the local community (DC4). Therefore, the story of School C seems to be about how distance teaching and school cooperation have been used to keep a diverse study offer available within the local community.

6.3.2 Participants' interpretation of messages from policy documents

As in the previous schools, discussion in School C about how participants perceived the policy on school autonomy centred on The Upper Secondary Education Act (No. 92/2008) and the National Curriculum Guide (2011). In addition, participants also highlighted the requirement to limit study programmes for matriculation to three years.

The Upper Secondary Education Act 2008

The two members of the School Board who were interviewed had participated in the work on preparing the establishment of School C. They knew from the beginning that the school had to specialise in some way, "Because we understood that it would not be possible to have such a small upper secondary school in this area" (IC13). The new law allowed schools to specialise more than before, and this was believed to have made it possible to establish School C:

> The law makes it possible to establish this school, and in the preparatory group, we discussed it from the beginning: we were not going to establish another upper secondary school like anyone else, we wanted that this school could serve this community and could have some speciality. (IC13)

Board members recalled that they were closely involved in discussions about the study offer in the beginning: "We were discussing the options, what study programmes, and then there was always this, to connect it to the area" (IC13). However, as Board member 14 noted, "now it is more like that we [just] get an overview of what they [the school leaders and teachers] are thinking and speculating" (IC14).

The head teacher recalled, when starting at School C, how he experienced the policy on school autonomy as greater freedom and trust for schools:

> After a very short time, I realised the enormous opportunity that this entails [...] a new school is being created and there is total freedom. You can almost [just] sit down and think, 'how should an upper secondary school be?; you have no employees who are losing their jobs [...] we do not have to deal with a central system, but the system can move on very fast, and because these changes are now faster than ever before, [there is] this trust which is showed to us to implement this by ourselves. [...] We are so lucky not to be stuck with some old ideas on what the 'educated man' should be [...] written by some committee in the Ministry, like it was in the old curriculum. (IC1)

This quote suggests that it was easier for School C to utilise policy on school autonomy compared to well-established schools, as the school was new so there was no resistance due to concerns about how changes might impact teachers' job security.

The teachers described their autonomy from several perspectives. Teacher 4 thinks his autonomy has increased due to a more open curriculum, but he noted that he also had considerable autonomy before:

> It is, of course, totally unbound from the curriculum, which before told me how to teach a bit, but I still had complete choice of what kind of material I used, and I still have it. (IC4)

Teacher 7 started her first year of teaching in School C. She too experienced considerable autonomy, but pointed out that she is teaching her specialty alone:

> I have, of course, an enormous amount of autonomy. I do not know how it is in other schools, [...] [but] it has both pros and cons. I am the only XXX [subject] teacher here, so that gives me considerable [autonomy], I control a lot because there is, of course, no other XXX [subject] teacher here. (IC7)

Teacher 6 thinks teachers' autonomy depends also on encouragement from the head teacher:

> The encouragement lies, of course, in the school leaders, so that [if] the head teacher is open, you get to do what you want, to try out, and sometimes it has succeeded and sometimes not. (IC6)

The parents who were interviewed reported no participation in determining the education offer, as engagement within the Parent Council is limited: "I try to call a meeting, [but] there is always someone [who is] busy, or something and no one can attend" (IC11). However, Student 8 noted that there are two representatives from the Student Council in the School Council, and, if there are new study programmes, "it is discussed there" (IC8).

The National Curriculum Guide 2011

The final issue of the new National Curriculum Guide had not yet been published when School C was developing its study programmes and writing descriptions for the course units. Teacher 4 noted, however, that there was draft circulated by the MoE for comments from various stakeholders, and that School C based its work around that draft. The head teacher reported that there were few criteria on what should be taught, in the beginning, only that there should be a total of 45 units in the core subjects:

> I did not get a course description from the Ministry to follow, each and every course description was shaped according to what we thought was important for the students to study, [...] the freedom we had was not just to think about what subjects we would teach, but also how we should teach them. [...] There were not many criteria, [just] there shall be 45 units in Icelandic, Maths, and English, but we decided the proportions between these courses – there were no instructions that told us what Icelandic should be or what Maths. (IC1)

This quote reveals the great freedom the schools were initially granted; however, as Teacher 4 pointed out, when the National Curriculum Guide was finally issued in 2011, the number of requirements had increased:

> This was naturally changed, when it started to make requirement for academic study programmes in a third language, and Nordic language [...] there are all sorts of things that have narrowed the framework. (IC4)

All the study programmes had to be approved by the MoE; however it took time for the Ministry to develop a database to keep track of all the programmes and the overall process. Teacher 4 recalled that when the school submitted their study programmes through the curriculum database in 2014, they were asked to make changes to the way they had interpreted the National Curriculum Guide regarding Sports:

> When the study programmes went for approval in around 2014, when it was all being approved through the database, there were units that had to be moved. All of a sudden there was this demand that there could not be too many units of Sport - it was cut then and it was a demand from the Ministry. [...] The National Curriculum Guide states that this must be in the offer until the age of 18, [but] nothing else was stated there, so we had put sports courses on every term. [...] I know there were more schools which had to cut sport units too. (IC4)

However, interpretation of which subjects schools had the freedom to teach according to the National Curriculum Guide was not the only challenge at that time. Teachers in School C also had to implement the new unit system and the qualification framework provided in the Guide. However, Teacher 6 thinks it made a difference that the school was new and several teachers were new to teaching themselves, as they were not trying to fit established courses into the new qualification framework:

> It was quite a lot of work to create the courses and make sure that there is the right workload on students in terms of units and so on, but I think it just went well; you may have done it wrong the first semester you taught the course, but then you could just fix it, but you did not sit with any particular study material and thoughts about whether this could fit in or something like that. (IC6)

Again, this quote indicates that it might have been easier for teachers in School C to implement the provisions of the new national curriculum because the school was new itself.

School C was one of the first to implement the new Guide, and the assistant head teacher reported that this created challenges in terms of evaluating students' study if they moved between schools as schools were implementing the new qualification framework at different times:

> I think it may have changed now the other schools have joined this system, but they [students] often got into a bit of trouble, and I think it was not just our students but students in general who came from schools who had [the new qualification] levels in the new system, [so] that if they moved to other schools, then maybe they [the other schools] were not taking this and evaluating it as it should. (IC2)

Schools still following the old National Curriculum Guide had to find ways to evaluate courses from the new system; however, this was only a temporary issue which disappeared once all the upper secondary schools had adapted to the new qualification framework.

The issue of naming new courses and in putting them into the Ministry's systems was also identified as an additional burden for schools, especially when the official curriculum database was introduced. The assistant head teacher described how the school had to create specific names for all courses and input them into INNA, the central system for managing students' applications for upper secondary schools and their study progress, and later, how descriptions for all the courses and study programmes had to be added to the curriculum database:

> We had to make names for the courses, this was just a three-letter name with the qualification level and then one letter and then the number of units, and this was a lot of work, and then, of course, I had to put this all into INNA. [...] And then comes the curriculum database, and I am just going to say that I think it is a monster, [...], I felt this was a lot of work, and that I was going to do the exact same thing again [that] I had just done shortly before in INNA. And I do not feel like it has come true, this idea that this would be so descriptive [using] these names; it [just] makes it more difficult for me, and not just me, but definitely everyone else, regarding evaluating courses. (IC2)

This suggests that administration in the school increased with the advent of the policy on school autonomy. This relates both to the registration of the study programmes in the curriculum database and the fact that evaluating students' study between schools became more complicated because the new courses names were less transparent than before.

The shortening of study time for matriculation

School C's original contract with the MoE specified that study programmes for matriculation should be 200 units. The head teacher explained that, in his view, this was more prescriptive than the law required, but it was driven by decisions in the MoE:

> The permission for the shortening is determined by the Act in 2008, [which] gave permission for study that is three to four years, [...] The law

> allowed 180 to 240 units - it is the Ministry which thought it was necessary to have some fixed number, and why [did] they decide [on] 200 rather than 180? It is the decision of the minister. [...] [And] it does not fit into three years' study because that would be 180 units, so this means that you are to learn more than a full [year's] study each year. (IC1)

As the head teacher points out, the 2008 Act states that full-time student work for one year is equivalent to 60 units. However, when schools were required to shorten study programmes to three years, it was decided that they should comprise 200 units (rather than 180). This was also in accordance with the provisions of the National Curriculum Guide 2011, which specified a minimum of 200 units for matriculation.

The assistant head teacher explained how School C decided to cut the initial courses in the core subjects on the study programmes for matriculation by removing some of the introductory level elements:

> We had to take from somewhere to be three years or three and a half, ... at least in these core subjects. [...] [So,] we take the first courses away, we just put them on the second level, [...] and I had this conversation with my colleagues in other upper secondary schools who thought it was just awful, [...] [however,] I argued that the majority of them [students] should be able to handle this, and that was, in fact, the case, but of course, we [still] have courses on the first level, because we accept everyone. (IC2)

However, School C still offered these courses for students who needed to start on the first qualification level. Teacher 4, who had previously taught his speciality according to the former National Curriculum Guide in another upper secondary school, commented on this too:

> The main change is that I am starting to teach later with regard to students learning ability, the basic courses have been taken out, they were on the first qualification level, and we [now] start at the second level, ... actually one is no longer repeating the last part of tenth grade in the beginning of upper secondary school. (IC4)

For Teacher 4, the changes removed repetition of learning between school levels, thereby shortening the study period without limiting students' learning.

6.3.3 The impact of contextual factors on policy enactments in school

The interviews conducted in School C revealed three prominent themes relating to how factors in the school's context influenced the enactment of policy on school autonomy. As in the other schools, the first one addresses professional beliefs and policy making and describes staff and other stakeholders' views on how the school utilised its autonomy. The second relates to the financial framework and how the size of the school

impacts its scope for meeting students' needs. The third covers students' choice and describes the characters of demand for schools and study from both students' and parents' perspectives.

Professional beliefs and policy making

The policy on school autonomy is believed to have mattered for the existence of School C. However, the journey from foundational decision to full operation of a school required strong and effective leadership. School Board member 13 believes that the qualities of the new head teacher have proved to be good for the school:

> He went far beyond my expectations, ... had a creative and good imagination, strong and courageous, which mattered enormously for the school. (IC13)

His capabilities helped the leadership to make strategic decisions about which courses to offer and how best to specialise. Before the school's foundation, there had already been evolving ideas on the study offer, and the head teacher explained how various factors influenced decision making on what to offer:

> We could not go into vocational study - there was a lot of equipment and other things [...] Then it was twofold: on one hand, what was it most likely that people wanted - that's how the social sciences and the natural sciences were created, [...] it's like a good preparation for most subjects in universities - then it is the community we live in, what is special here, [...] and then it turns out that sports are just the main issue, [...] At the same time, this has been a growing outdoor recreation area and tourist area in certain fields [...] but at the same time there were groups here in the community who were interested in implementing arts here. (IC1)

School leaders were aware that, in addition to the study offer, the school had to specialise somehow. The local population was small and there was a tradition of students going elsewhere for study. The decision was made to focus on information technology in all teaching, and the school's policy on assessment was made clear from the beginning. The head teacher reported, "It is formative assessment and no final tests, it is a central decision - how you have the projects, how you evaluate, that is flexible" (IC1). All the members of staff who were interviewed shared similar professional beliefs and were supportive of the school's assessment policy.

However, there were doubts amongst other stakeholders about these innovations. Most interviewees reported how they experienced prejudice in the beginning, both from the community, other areas, and from the school system itself. Parent 12 explained that the attitude, "that we were just a fake school, ... was here when we first started" (IC12). School Board member 14 reported how school leaders had to put a lot of effort into

getting the MoE to believe in their new ideas, the new study programmes in line with the strength of the community, and what the school would be capable of:

> They had to prove quite a lot to the Ministry regarding when the school was going new ways - it had to be endlessly proving that the school could offer this kind of study. People were always like that, 'Wait..., What ...' - whatever it was, it had to be fought for so often in order for it to be evaluated [...] that this was a real study in itself. (IC14)

School Board member 13 noted that the school also needed to prove itself to locals, even though they had been fighting for the establishment of the school:

> It is so weird, that the community welcomes this school but at the same time is a bit suspicious because it [the school] needs to prove its value, the school's reputation needs to be created, traditions, customs and so on. (IC13)

As this quote indicates, a new school needs to create a good reputation, and this can take time. As highlighted by Board member 14, some local people were sceptical at first, especially as long-established traditions of study and students' choosing other schools were challenged:

> The traditions here were that students went a lot, or almost exclusively, into the large town, [...] and it took, I would guess, two years to get people in the area to realise that this is a real school. Some did not want to take the chance to go to this school, [...] but then, when people saw here is just a great school and then they started to come back. [...] So, it was like this, maybe, a bit [of a] struggle over the traditions, because the school was truly going in totally different ways which people did not know. (IC14)

Despite doubts among stakeholders about the new ways, the school's specialisation became one of the arguments for not merging School C with other schools in the region:

> It [the Ministry] was supposed to merge everything here, [but] then it came as an argument against it, the fact that these schools had specialised, ... X school specialises in excellent students and ... Y school specialises in vocational study and we specialise in information technology and [...], if these were merged, then maybe this diversity would be lost, [...] and we are, of course, different from all other schools in that we do not have final tests. (IC7)

This quote from Teacher 7 reveals how the school's speciality became pivotal in the fight for it to remain autonomous, something both locals and school leaders had understood right from the beginning.

Some teachers and school leaders also reported that they experienced distrust from the University of Iceland regarding whether students would be well enough prepared for university study. Teacher 4 described how pressure came from the University for certain subjects to be taught, even if they were no longer specified in the National Curriculum Guide:

> They want to control what we teach, [...] it is more related to the core subjects of the study programmes - they want to go into more depth in certain subjects or want certain subjects, which it is no longer a duty to teach but was before. (IC4)

Teacher 7 reported that pressure like this has led her to change some of his teaching:

> It was a call from the university, that students need to come better prepared - that is why I am putting a lot of emphasis on the third level and [more] academic, [...] more than in the beginning. (IC7)

The assistant head teacher described how she felt that the university had not yet adopted the idea of competence-based learning:

> Does not a university have to trust that a student with 15 units in Icelandic is qualified for university, rather than that he or she read this or that? I am, of course, getting questions from universities on almost everything: 'What is this in the old [system]?', and they're counting the units which they have finished in science or maths. (IC2)

These quotes suggest that there might be certain distrust within the university towards changes at upper secondary school level. It seems to relate to concerns that students might not be properly prepared for university, depending on what subjects upper secondary schools decide to teach, but also because there is less transparency within the new qualification framework.

Financial framework

Finance of upper secondary schools depends to large extent on the number of students, which means it is more difficult for smaller schools to offer diverse study to their students. The challenge is even greater when the school is in a sparsely populated area, as was the case with School C. One of the most prominent themes to emerge from the interviews related to this situation and how the school responded to it. School Board member 13 explained how the distance-learning students became a prerequisite for School C to grow:

> The distance-learning students who are such a huge group, a growing group, and it matters a lot for the school; this group is not visible in the community daily, but it really enables the school to grow and prosper. (IC13)

School C had also worked on increasing students' choice through distance learning and teaching in cooperation with other schools. The assistant head teacher described how some small schools in rural areas have developed a platform for offering of distance-learning courses. "We take students from them and they from us, and thereby we are trying to utilise better the course offer we have and to get students into groups we might otherwise not be able to teach" (IC2).

Apart from the challenge of small number of students which made it demanding to offer diverse study, financial challenges were not highlighted by participants. According to the head teacher there have never been financial difficulties in the school's operation:

> I have made sure that there is enough money here, and it has always been like that, so we do not need any money - we have managed to keep the operation of the school always in surplus and been able to have everything we need. (IC1)

Although the school has managed to stay within budget since it was established, there have been doubts that other resources are adequate. The head teacher recalled that concerns were raised when the plan to merge upper secondary schools in the region was proposed:

> When it was the plan to merge schools here in X [the region], then one of the arguments for the merging was that small schools in rural areas did not have well-educated staff; and then a comparison of all schools in the region was made, assessing the education level of staff, and it was the highest here. (IC1)

While there have been doubts that the school was not getting enough educated teachers because of its rural location, this has not been the reality. The head teacher thinks that, to some extent, the creative environment of the school has attracted teachers and encouraged them to stay.

Students' demands for school and study

Interviews with students and parents revealed two prominent themes concerning students' choice of school and study: students' uncertainty of choice and need for support and parents wanting students to attend school close to home.

The participating students expressed the view that not all students are sure in the beginning about what they really want to study to prepare for a future job. Student 10

pointed out that there is more diversity on offer after they finish elementary school, and when they learn more about that, their interest might change:

> I think 16 years maybe, it is quite a good age to go to upper secondary school, but I think it is pretty young to be able to choose, at least for some to choose, something to do when you become older or when you grow up and go into the labour market. [...] When one starts to look at things which are not taught in elementary school, then I find ... your interest changes very much. (IC10)

Students also spoke about their choice of school and study. Two of them had been in other schools before coming to School C. Both reported difficulty in learning and/or dyslexia. Student 10 lives in one of the neighbouring villages and had originally started in the vocational school in the large town. She had wanted to learn hairdressing but needed to take some preparation courses first because of low grades from elementary school. However, she decided to change over to School C and is now on the social science study programme. She explained her reasons for choosing the school:

> I thought it more interesting and also it fascinated me more how few [students] were in this school, and also the formative assessment courses. This is, of course, a formative assessment school and no tests, and I have always had a lot of test anxiety, [so] this suits me much better. (IC10)

Student 9 was not raised in the area, but she had dropped out of schools elsewhere in the country and was looking for a better school experience:

> I was never able to find myself, [...] somehow [I] always lost interest and just did not feel well in school, so I took a break. [...] Then I wanted to reach further in my study and started distance study with School C. [...] I felt the system [was] so enormously good, and I felt it suited me much better than all the other schools I have tried; therefore, I started to think of coming here. (IC9)

Student 9 found the arrangement of study in School C was suited to her needs, leading her to move to the neighbourhood after her experience of distance. She is now on the social science study programme, which is in line with her interests, as: "I have just always been interested in psychology" (IC9).

A prominent pattern in the discussion was that parents want students to study close to their home. Student 8, who lives in the village where School C is located, reported that this affected his choice of study: "See, I wanted to go on the xxx programme in XXX [a school far away], it is just that my mother did not want me to go" (IC8). He then chose the social science study programme in School C, but is no longer sure about what he will do when he graduates: "I wanted to learn about administration, then I am not interested [in that] any longer" (IC8).

Student 9 also recalled how her parents tried to influence her choice of school:

> It was just everything which told me not to come here - my friends all went to other schools and [my] parents wanted me at home. [...] My family has, like, old fashioned opinions and just wanted me to go to a school with a traditional old system, [...] and... formative assessment courses, and to study that much on the internet and such [here in School C], they found it not good enough. (IC9)

This quote from Student 9 shows that her parents wanted her to study close to home but also reveals their scepticism about School C due to its innovative teaching approaches.

Students' choice to study and attend school in their home area was high in parents' minds, as they feel that 16 is too young to go away from home, so the location of the school is important:

> It is no small difference, to have the kids longer at home instead of having to send them away at 16 years old. I am not sure that my daughter would have gone away at 16 - so it is incredibly great that she can stay at home for school. (IC11)

As Parent 12 pointed out, students now have more choice and can still go to school in the large town if they want to; however, it's often better for parents and students if they stay at home:

> The kids have a lot to choose from, and, I mean, some do not choose to stay here, but I just feel the difference between having a kid in school here, and I have also had a boy in X (school in the large town), and it is just unbelievable how much simpler it is to have the kids at home, both for them and for us, travelling between [places] and them trying to get home at weekends and such, [and] it is not always possible to travel. (IC12)

This highlights one of the challenges of living in a rural area. Travelling between villages and towns is not always possible in wintertime and depends on the weather conditions, especially in the highlands. The distance to the large town is also considered too long for a daily drive: "Nobody is driving this far every day, no one will last with that" (IC12). Parent 11 also pointed out that going away for study brings additional costs for accommodation, as it is "of course, very expensive to rent in X [the large town]" (IC11). These quotes indicate that the issue of students' choice in rural areas is also a matter of accessibility and equal opportunities to study.

6.3.4 The new policy in relation to school leaders' and teachers' working environment

Two themes emerged from analysis of the interviews with school leaders and teachers in School C on policy on school autonomy in relation to their working environment. These are educational responsibility and management and teachers' responsibility and collaboration.

Educational responsibility and management

Policy on school autonomy is considered to have increased school leaders' educational responsibility. The head teacher described how he perceives head teachers' responsibility both for the content of education and students' maturation:

> The educational responsibility that rests on me as a head teacher, I need to think about how I think education is best used. [...] It is not just about [...] further education, but also the individual's maturation and autonomy in an ever-changing world. (IC1)

This quote also highlights an increase in head teachers' visionary role, in which leadership now involves thinking about what kind of education is best for students. However, increased responsibility for education content also involves decision making on what can be taught within the school's budget. The head teacher describes how this has changed his management role:

> I cannot tell [you] about other schools, [but] I can tell about this one, and it is clear that when you have become a ruler in what is to happen, it changes all the mechanism in the school. When it no longer comes as a pile from above which falls on you and tells you 'This is how your school is to be', we just talk about it together and then it is my final decision what goes into teaching, and it builds just on, 'Can I afford it?' and 'Are there enough students in it?' (IC1)

The assistant head teacher thinks it has been easier for them as school leaders to lead and manage change in a new school compared to a well-established school, echoing the head teacher's made earlier comments:

> I, of course, meet people and talk to people elsewhere, [and] it is quite a privilege for us to have been able to create a school like this - not to be a school that is trying to change an old system, with people who may have been in the same roles for decades - this is, of course, a totally different thing. (IC2)

This quote indicates that one of the main challenges in the working context of school leaders has been managing teachers' resistance to change. This arises for various reasons, including lack of belief in the changes or concerns about job security. School

leaders in School C are aware that they are in a much better position than most because, as the head teacher noted, in a new school "you have no employees who are losing their jobs" (IC1).

The head teacher also noted that he felt more professional discussion about the policy on school autonomy was needed between schools, educators, and institutions such as universities:

> What I felt missing in enacting this policy is professional discussion about it – education – discussion between schools, between educators, with educational institutions which are educating teachers. [...] People somehow always talked about this shortening, [...] nobody discussed the content of education or what you need to learn. [...] Where is this discussion about this changed system? [...] I mean, there was discussion with the Teachers' Union about what teachers [would] get paid for the shortening, [...] there were just everybody ready to suffer over shortening, but the educational discussion, it was just like we did not have the maturity for it. (IC1)

This suggests that the pressure on schools to shorten study programmes for matriculation came to dominate discussion in the school community at that time, leaving no space for broader questions about the educational content.

School leaders in School C did not raise the issue of the need for more control in parallel to increased educational responsibility. The head teacher was happy with the system of evaluation, particularly the school's self-evaluation, which the school conducts each year: "I think it is just a very, very, good evaluation of what we are doing" (IC1). He also reported that it had mattered for the school that his assistant head teacher has an educational background in the field of internal evaluation:

> Naturally, we have set criteria ourselves, to measure our own quality in internal evaluation, ... then comes this external evaluation from the Ministry. [...] So there is control. [...] I am, however, so fortunate in this school to have assistant head teacher [...] and she is just a complete genius in... [developing] a systematic methodology on evaluation and in determining how this is built up. (IC1)

This quote indicates that schools might be in different positions with respect to their ability to develop and conduct self-evaluation, as this task calls for specific knowledge which may not be available in all schools.

Teachers' responsibility and collaboration

The teachers who were interviewed had different backgrounds, but only one had experience of teaching under the former policy at upper secondary school level. This

teacher, Teacher 4, thinks this is a better policy than the former one: "Because teachers get to teach what they are interested in or get to make changes in the courses they teach according to what they are interested in" (IC4). Teacher 5 added that, as teachers in a new school, they were not required to rewrite old course descriptions, but instead "had to create all the course descriptions, from the beginning, and we did it" (IC5). And, as teachers in other schools noted, while this gave teachers considerable freedom, it created problems finding suitable teaching material; "therefore, we are struggling with getting textbooks, because we have written down a course which has these competences or aims, you know" (IC5).

One aspect of how most teachers interviewed in School C perceived their responsibility was their desire for greater cooperation with other teachers teaching the same subject in order to become better teachers. Teacher 5 explained his reasoning:

> Because you become a much better teacher with the conversation, you handle [things] better, the ideas stream between people when there is this professional discussion. (IC5)

This suggests that cooperation is believed to be important for the function of teachers' professional autonomy. From another perspective but also related to teachers' responsibility was their view on standardised tests and external evaluation. Teacher 7 explained that the absence of standardised tests placed greater responsibility and demands on the teachers:

> It would be easier to have standardised tests to teach towards, then I [would] have guidance. I think it would not be better study [though]. It tells me, when I get this autonomy then I am making demands for myself which are actually much more, because it is expected of me to be professional, and I am going to stand for that. It gives me aims which are actually much more than something which comes from the Ministry or which comes from above. (IC7)

However, the view that standardised tests would go against policy on school autonomy was widely expressed. As Teacher 5 pointed out, "If you want to have the freedom to make schools different and suitable for different communities and different students, then you cannot put them in the same box again" (IC5).

Teacher 4 commented that, while evaluations were in place, the various study programmes introduced under the policy on school autonomy needed to be evaluated regarding what had been accomplished for students:

> We have this external evaluation, we have this internal evaluation, [but] it is an evaluation of schools, it is not an evaluation of the curriculum, so it is missing. It [the system] lacks a group that looks at the curriculum, even though it is not the same everywhere, which looks at the expectations of

> the schools and what came out of it, which examines whether the structure supports students at a broader level. (IC4)

This quote sheds light on the fact that the study programmes from each school are not specifically evaluated by the external evaluation; however, this might be difficult due to the variety among them.

Another theme on teachers' working context related to how policy on school autonomy impacted job security. In the case of School C, it was in a positive way. All the teachers spoke about how distance teaching had become part of the school's ability to offer students more courses, and thereby better ensure teachers' job security:

> It naturally increases the number of students, the possibilities, and the staff here see what it means for their position - to have distance-learning students means that we can have full occupation. (IC4)

The offer of free selection is also a way for teachers to have a sufficient workload and to meet their interest for diverse teaching:

> I can always create courses for choice - I did it a lot in the beginning, but it has always been the case, if we get students for the courses then it is taught. I have the luxury problem that I teach core subjects, [so] I never need extra work, and I'm starting to miss not being able to create courses for choice. (IC7)

Teacher 4 discussed the benefits he saw in working in a new school as opposed to an established one, especially when the requirement to shorten the study time for matriculation was introduced:

> I mean, there is no one who lost their position to be able to set up these study programmes that we have, there is no one who had to cut his teaching. This is something I saw in X [another school] where people actually wanted to do something new but you are at the same time cutting maybe half of your job, [...] or something then you are losing your job by creating a new policy. (IC4)

He shared the view of the leadership team that the fact that School C was new meant that it avoided the type of conflict over change experienced in other schools:

> There was never something else here, so there are no conflicts of change, because we are starting in a new system, in a new place, and the only thing that has happened to people is that their job has increased because we have got more students. (IC4)

The above quotes suggest that School C was in a very different position compared to many other upper secondary schools when it came to enact policy on school autonomy.

The school was able to hire people from the beginning who were ready to take part in utilising policy on school autonomy to go in new directions. In addition, nobody had to worry about losing their jobs, so there was none of the resistance which can arise when systemic change is required.

6.3.5 The new policy and changes for students

The data analysis revealed two main themes related to what the policy of school autonomy might or might not have accomplished for students. The first theme concerns the option for students to stay at home and the second relates to more flexible study and greater choice.

The community got its school

The establishment of School C has led to students having the option of staying at home for school. Teacher 4 highlighted that this was what the community had been asking for. "The main thing is that this area had been calling for a school and [now] it gets its school [...], the community wanted to have their kids at home" (IC4). School C has also led to more local young people staying in education than before. As one parent explained:

> When this school was not here, then just a fraction of the students went to ... (the large town) in upper secondary school - kids just started to work before the school came. (IC12)

However, the opportunity to pursue upper secondary education is not just limited to young people. School Board member 14 noted that the existence of the school has also led to many adults returning to education: "In the beginning, there were a lot of people who came to the school, older students, who maybe did not have the opportunity to go before" (IC14). Another Board member highlighted how much the school has mattered for the self-esteem of the residents: "People, both young people and adults, who come to the school, they somehow rejoice and get energy and self-confidence, and [their] self-esteem increases, and people do something with themselves in new fields" (IC13).

More flexibility study and choice

The policy on school autonomy is believed to have led to more flexible study and more diverse choice for students. The head teacher highlighted how the open study programme offered by many schools, including School C, has increased possibilities for students to choose where they want to specialise. Courses within study programmes have also become more diverse:

> Now the students' freedom of choice is to choose a school with study programmes with courses that are not the same everywhere, [...] especially with all these open study programmes, which all schools more or less now offer, then the study path is actually an infinite set of courses,

> [...] you are going for some open programme and then you just decide the specialisation. I have graduated students, for example, with specialisation in health sciences, computer science, business [...] which are not study programmes by us. (IC1)

This quote from the head teacher shows how he conceives that students' choice is not solely determined by the formal study offer in School C. School Board member 13 highlighted how this way of thinking, along with the focus on cooperation with other schools and distance learning, has increased the possibility of diverse study for students in School C:

> The school leaders are just working on meeting students' needs; if you want to graduate from a business programme, then you just do it, and we find for you the courses you need via distance learning, so the possibilities are endless. An on-site student here can also be a distance-learning student somewhere else. (IC13)

The open study programmes have also made it easier for students to have their study evaluated if they change school. Teacher 4 pointed out how this has increased students' flexibility: "It makes it easier to move between schools, to take a specialisation from one school with you to another school which does not have that specialisation." (IC4). Students told stories about friends who had found it difficult to have their previous study evaluated when changing school; however, this had not been a problem for them when changing over to School C: "I got everything evaluated [that] I had been taking there in the vocational school" (IC10).

Policy on school autonomy is also believed to have led to innovations in the study programmes themselves, as the assistant head teacher pointed out:

> There is [now] a possibility to create something new, if someone is interested in something. [...] I think, for example, that the outdoor study programme is an example of this; [...] we could not have done that in the older system, and the art study programme. (IC2)

She went on to explain how the school has utilised the flexibility of the policy to create courses through foreign collaborative projects and how this has increased students' opportunities:

> We are, in reality, this small school here in the far [...] of the world, but we are in very close contact with the outside world. We are taking part in so many foreign collaborative projects, we are sending our students out and south, and I believe that they will naturally become more open-minded and learn from this. We have taken advantage of these projects, as well as the curriculum, to give us more opportunities to create a course out of this and work with it that way. (IC2)

However, more diversity and freedom are also believed to have increased students' responsibility for their choices. Teacher 4 pointed out that options under free selection are now greater and more substantial, so students need to consider the university requirements when making choices:

> It has to do with that it is not one study programme which gets you into a certain department of the university; you need to be more careful, to have [the right] courses within the free selection, and also because free selection is much [greater now], so that you can build things up to fit into a certain path. (IC4)

As Teacher 6 explained, more choice can be an advantage for students who know what they are aiming for at university; however, it can make things more complicated for those who are uncertain about their choices:

> If the students are aware of what they are going to do, that is to say after the matriculation, I think this is a huge advantage, because then they can naturally shape their upper secondary study based on that strategy. But, on the other hand, the students who are, if I can use the term 'wild', that is, [they] do not know what they are going to do, maybe it's a little uncomfortable for them, I could believe that. (IC6)

The students interviewed also think there is a lot on offer for young people to choose from. Student 8 described his view:

> It is, of course, both schools and study programmes; no school is alike, and then each school has its own study programmes, and it is, maybe, the same content but not the same method. (IC8)

When discussing what makes School C special, the students all agreed that diversity was a key feature: "There is just a lot of diversity, somehow, in everything - teaching methods, courses, and everything" (IC9), and Student 10 explained the importance of diversity in teaching methods: "Just that courses are taught with diversity, because, and I am talking about diverse assignments, [...] diversity matters very much if one is going to stay in school" (IC10). Prominent also among students' and parents' discussion was the support for students available in the school and the student-centred teaching methods. For example, Student 9 highlighted how the formative assessment is better for students who have test anxiety and that students learn no less than they would if they had regular tests:

> I think there's a lot more test anxiety in kids than you realise because it's [society's] always pushing you so much to do well on tests and such, and I just feel it's pointless, especially now, after I came to this school, it shows you that if you work well throughout the semester, you learn nothing less even if you do not take a test. (IC9)

Students' participation in shaping the study offer when it comes to free selection seems to be part of the daily culture within the school. Student 9 reported that "teachers look for students to come up with ideas for courses for free selection and such, because they want to meet what the students want" (IC9). When students have ideas for course, they just talk to the teachers or approach the head teacher. "We just walk up … and ask her whether it is possible to add this, and she is just, 'Yes, yes, we can have a look at that" (IC10). These quotes from students suggests there is direct personal communication between teachers, school leaders and students, something which may not be so easy to achieve in a larger school. Teacher 3 believes this has, along with other factors, influenced the choice of students who come from other regions:

> The reason is just how small this unit is, the system, teaching methods and the flexibility, more closeness to those who are teaching you, and somehow more personal, I experience this is our reputation. (IC3)

This quote suggest that School C has already developed a good reputation related to its speciality.

6.3.6 Summary

Findings from the case study of School C raise several issues. The first overarching theme on how participants have interpreted school autonomy from policy documents indicates mixed messages. The policy was perceived as granting considerable freedom and trust to schools, and the upper secondary law was, in fact, believed to have made it possible to establish School C because of the scope it gave schools to specialise. However, findings reveal that administration has increased, and that the scope for school autonomy reduced somewhat when the final version of the National Curriculum Guide was issued. In addition while the possibility of shortening the study time for matriculation was perceived as part of the policy on school autonomy, the Ministry's decision that the three-year study time is equal to 200 units is seen as in counter to the law.

The second overarching theme on the impact of contextual factors on policy enactment revealed three prominent factors. Firstly, how professional beliefs among school leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders impacted policy making on the study offer in the school. Findings indicate that while staff largely supported the school's innovative policies, efforts had to be made to demonstrate their value because of doubts and distrust from external stakeholders. Secondly, and related to the financial basis of the school, the small size of the school and the sparsely populated area made it a challenge to offer students diverse study. However, the school responded by focusing on distance learning and collaboration to keep the study offer diverse. The third influencing factor in the school's context was students' demand for school and study. Findings indicate disparity between policy on study suited to students' different aims and needs and the reality surrounding students' choice. On one hand, many students are believed to be uncertain about what they want to study when they start upper secondary school, so it might be a challenge for them to choose from the range of course options available to

them, some locally and some further afield. On the other hand, parents want students to choose a school close to home, largely because they think 16 is too young to move away. However, distances, travel conditions, and the cost of living away from home are also considerations, and these can limit students' ability to exercise real choice. Thus, the case of School C raises the issue of accessibility and equal opportunities to study in rural areas and to what extent policy on school autonomy can overcome these challenges.

The third overarching theme on the new policy in relation to school leaders' and teachers' working contexts raised several issues. In the case of school leaders' roles, the policy on school autonomy is believed to have increased their educational responsibility. In this respect, the head teacher emphasised that more professional discussion about what constitutes a 'good' education was needed when the policy was introduced. However, school leaders in School C consider that it has been easier for them to manage change compared to the well-established schools because the school was new and there was therefore no resistance from teachers relating to job-insecurity or changes to existing practices. Indeed, the policy on school autonomy was believed to be positive for teachers in that they have more chance to make changes and to teach what they are interested in. However, at the same time, their responsibility for students' study has increased. In this respect teachers highlighted the need for cooperation with other teachers in the same subject area in order for their work to become more professional. Prominent in the interviews was how teachers in School C perceived their job security as increasing due to the increase in distance-learning students and in the offer of free selection. Like the school leaders, they also raised the issue of the school's status as a new school and how it might explain peoples' different experience of how the policy on school autonomy has influenced their working context.

The fourth theme was on the new policy and resulting changes for students. Most prominent was the belief that the policy was a prerequisite for the establishment of the school in an area where a school was much needed, with an evident gain being that students now have the option of staying at home for their upper secondary education. The establishment of the school has enabled more students go to stay on at school than before and encouraged some adults to return to the classroom. The policy is also believed to have led to more flexible study and more diverse choice for students, with the open study programme increasing possibilities for students to choose where they want to specialise and courses within study programmes becoming more diverse. However, greater diversity and freedom are also believed to have increased students' responsibility for their choices, particularly in terms of selecting appropriate courses to prepare them for university entry in their desired subject. In this respect, it was noticeable that both students and parents spoke about the high levels of support for students in the school and the use of teaching and assessment methods suited to students. In fact, these factors are thought to have influenced students from outside the area to choose School C, contributing to its growing reputation for diverse, supportive, student-centred teaching and learning.

6.4 Case study of School D

School D is a comprehensive school, with a long history, serving a large area in the countryside. There are several small villages and towns in the region and School D is in the largest town. The economy is characterised by agriculture and tourism; however, many residents work in the capital area, which is not that far away. Travel can be challenging in the winter due to a mountain road, and when School D was established, one of the conditions was that a school bus and dormitory for students who lived further away were provided (DD9). The school is close to the average size of schools in the capital area, and it offers a broad range of academic and vocational programmes (DD8). One other upper secondary school exists in this part of rural Iceland, a long-established grammar school. That school offers two academic study programmes for matriculation, and most of the students stay in a dormitory operated by the school (DD7).

The content of this subchapter is divided into five main sections. The first focuses on the findings from analysis of documents and gives insight into the enactment of policy on school autonomy in School D and the associated challenges. These documents span the period from 2009-2019 and include annual reports, an external evaluation, and a school contract. A full list of the documents from School D can be found in Appendix 2, and anonymised details of the study participants are provided in Appendix 1. In the sections thereafter, the four main themes which emerged from analysis of the interviews are explored.

6.4.1 Policy enactment and challenges in the school's context

School leaders and teachers in School D started to work on new study programmes in the autumn of 2008, soon after the establishment of the new law on increased school autonomy. The annual report 2008-2009 reveals that the work was done in cooperation with two other comprehensive schools located in other parts of the country, both, like School D, not far from the capital area. These three schools had formed a collaboration on school development over the years, (DD1), and, when the new Act required new study programmes descriptions to be implemented in all schools in 2011, they collaborated on that too. However, because of the financial crisis and the resulting reduction in government spending, the Parliament delayed the enactment of this provision until 2015, so the school decided to aim for 2012-13 instead. This change and the work involved is described in the school's annual report for 2009-2010:

> The main work entailed setting aims on knowledge, skills and competence for individual study subjects and courses and dividing the aims into [qualification] levels. [...] When the law was set, it was assumed that it would fully come into force in the beginning of the school year 2011-

> 2012; however, due to a contraction in government spending, the Parliament postponed the entry into force of various legal provisions, including Article 23,[25] until the beginning of the school year 2015-2016. In School D it was decided to aim at introducing the provision in the beginning of the school year 2012-2013. Then it was also decided that the next autumn term would be used to develop study programmes and the education offer. (DD2)

Considerable groundwork was done within School D to try to get new programmes ready by 2012, despite the easing of pressure from the government. However, the annual reports for subsequent years revealed little progress; teachers called for clearer instructions for the review of courses and the structure of study programmes and the work was put on hold for a while (DD3, DD4).

Under the leadership of a new head teacher, a second effort was made to review the study offer. In an annex to School D's contract to the MoE in 2013,[26] the implementation of the 2008 Act was set as one of the main aims for the school in 2015 (DD8). This entailed, amongst other things:

- Reviewing the study offer in cooperation with the school's external community;
- New study offers with the coming of an extension to the building for vocational studies;
- Writing course units descriptions for each course and dividing studies into qualification levels;
- Development of a new study programme in food technology;
- Working on the curriculum for vocational studies with the partner schools;
- Reviewing the horsemanship programme.

[25] Article 23 of the Upper Secondary Act (No. 92/2008) states that: "study programme descriptions shall be structured as provided in the general part of the National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Schools and the general part of the relevant school curriculum guide" and mandates that "Upper secondary schools shall submit their study programme descriptions to the Minister for confirmation." It also confirms that "Two or more upper secondary schools may cooperate on a study programme description and submit it jointly for confirmation." (Upper Secondary Education Act, 2008) https://www.government.is/media/menntamalaraduneyti-media/media/frettatengt2016/Thyding-log-um-framhaldsskola-juli-2016.pdf)

[26] Contracts signed between the Minister and individual upper secondary schools typically have a term of three to five years, but they are assessed annually and can be revised by mutual agreement (Upper Secondary Education Act, 2008 https://www.government.is/media/menntamalaraduneyti-media/media/frettatengt2016/Thyding-log-um-framhaldsskola-juli-2016.pdf).

The Act was implemented in accordance with the teachers' collective agreement, negotiated by the Teachers' Union in 2014, and with a grant from a development fund (DD8). However, the work on the study offer was not the only challenge at that time. The school had been dealing with a financial deficit for some years and this led to the school having to reduce administrative costs in the autumn of 2013 (DD8). The external evaluation in 2015 indicates that the financial operation of the dormitory had been difficult, and the drop-out of students before finishing their term had led to a reduction in funding from the Ministry (DD7). The external evaluation also cautioned that student numbers had decreased by 10% over the previous five years and the shortening of study time for matriculation was likely to reduce them further. Nevertheless, the report suggested that more vocational programmes that appeal to girls were offered to try to address the gender imbalance across the vocational study programmes offered (DD7). Although the lack of adequate facilities for vocational studies had been a challenge for years, the evaluation reported that a plan had been made by the state, in cooperation with the surrounding municipalities, to more than double housing provision over the next few years (DD7).

In 2014 a huge meeting was organised with staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders from the community. The purpose was to discuss the school's future and what emphasis should be placed on in a new curriculum and in other development work in the school. Among the results was a decision that the school should focus on developing a more diverse study offer and giving students' more freedom to choose what suits them (DD5). The school's annual report for 2014-2015 indicates that the work on reviewing the study programmes was mostly done within each department, and this created a lot of extra work (DD5). At the same time, there was discussion about the implementation of a new job evaluation process[27] following the teachers' new wage contract in 2014. The following quote in the report is from one of the teachers in the school:

> Many new courses will be taught in Icelandic next winter. In some cases, there are no textbooks available. The courses and teaching need to be organised, [we need to] find reading materials, prepare projects, and have everything in the job evaluation. There doesn't seem to be much time allowed for preparing these changes in the school's plan. Teachers will, therefore, have to take on a lot of extra work that will not be valued or specially paid for. (DD5)

[27] The new job evaluation was part of the teachers' wage agreement with the government in 2014 and was supposed to be implemented the year after or in 2015. The job evaluation entailed a detailed breakdown of teachers' tasks and work which was then to be used for assessment of their salary. https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/03-Verkefni/Mannaudsmal-rikisins/Skjol/KI_2015%20%C3%BAtg%C3%A1fa%206.pdf

The quote reveals some of the challenges involved in changing the subject content, notably the need for different teaching material and how time for work on the changes needed to be included in teachers' job evaluations (DD5).

Despite these challenges, School D achieved its aim of implementing the new curriculum in 2015-2016. The head teacher, in her annual report 2017 (DD6), described how the study programmes for matriculation had changed, giving students much greater choice. Now students can choose between several lines in a study programme for matriculation, including an 'open line', where students need to take certain core subjects but otherwise have a great deal of choice over what courses they take. This level of choice is considered as a possible explanation for the open line becoming the most popular programme in the school; however, as the head teacher points out, at the same time demand for science has declined (DD6).

The changes made in the vocational studies offer depended greatly on the new extension which was put into operation in 2017. The head teacher's report (DD6) shows how this enabled the school to offer more comprehensive study programmes for electrical and mechanical engineering and to take in more students. Two new shorter foundation programmes for hairdressing and food technology and tourism (together in one programme) were also started. School D had, by that time, collaborated with other schools on the review of the content of the study programmes for the certified trades; however, they were still waiting for Ministry approval before the revised programmes could be adopted. (DD6)

The head teacher's report in 2017 also covers changes in students' study progress and choice at that time. It notes that drop-out has decreased compared to previous years, with demand for vocational studies increasing. However, gender segregation remains an issue in the vocational studies, with girls are mainly applying for the hairdressing programme. The report also states that the operation of the dormitory for students has stopped:

> No dormitory was operated in 2017. [...] There is a demand for this from the school's service area in the east [...] who consider a dormitory of importance for students from there, but this has not been met, since the need overall is not great and remains uncertain. (DD6)

This quote reveals the school's challenge in meeting the needs of students who live in rural areas some distance from the school. Their small numbers make it difficult to operate a dormitory cost-effectively; however, a solution is needed to equalise their access to study in comparison to students in the more urban areas.

6.4.2 Participants' interpretation of messages from policy documents

As with the other three schools, two policy documents were prominent when participants discussed how they perceived the policy on school autonomy: the 2008

Act and the National Curriculum Guide (2011). Here too, participants highlighted the requirement for schools to shorten the study time for matriculation. In this section, participants' interpretations of the main messages from these policy documents are explored and how the shortening requirement affected their experiences.

The Upper Secondary Education Act 2008

Members of the School board highlighted the importance of the policy on school autonomy over curriculum for schools to adapt their study offer to meet different communities and students' needs. Board member 18 explained:

> Communities are different, just within the country, and we see it - like here [there] is demand for something that is not demanded elsewhere. Then, of course, it matters to be able to respond, like when tourism grows, there is scope to respond by increasing professionalism. (ID18)

School Board member 17 noted the benefit for students when schools can offer them more choice: "Students can play to their strengths a bit more, and that might possibly prevent drop-out; I think this is the right policy for that" (ID17). However, although Board members in School D participate in discussion on the school's study offer, as Board member 16 reported, the initiative comes mainly from within the school:

> We are not directly participating in decision making, this comes from the school; we are asked, and we have come up with ideas at School Board meetings on what could be aimed at, for example, tourism, and we talked about the food technology, so we have been participating in this discussion, but the initiative has come from the school for the most part. (ID16)

Like the members of the School Board, school leaders within School D also saw the policy on school autonomy as an opportunity for change, from the very beginning. As the temporary head teacher put it, it enabled them to "aim the study offer for our context, the environment and community" (ID2). The policy also means that final decision making on the study offer has become the responsibility of school leaders: "Regarding changes in the study programmes, then it ends, of course, with school leaders taking the final decision, but there has been a lot of consultation with individual teachers and departments" (ID2). However, teachers are now given more freedom over the content of their individual subjects:

> The departments have had considerable autonomy, a lot of freedom to develop [...] and the teachers are naturally specialists in the subjects, so it would have been very difficult for school leaders to decide the exact content of all the courses. (ID2)

The teachers who were interviewed also think that their autonomy over the content of study has increased. Teacher 6 mentioned the possibility for more diverse study offer for students and for professional collaboration between teachers:

> I find it great, and I found the study programmes and the study too much tied down [...] and to have... diverse study and opportunities for more interdisciplinary work. (ID6)

Like the school leaders, Teacher 9 highlighted the possibility for the school to be able to specialise so as to meet the needs of the labour market: "In this area, what kind of employees do we need, what kind of jobs can students get here?" (ID9). While teacher 6 thinks his autonomy over the content of his subject has increased, he felt he had considerable autonomy before the introduction of the policy and related this to encouragement from school leaders: "Since I started to work in this school, there has been much encouragement and school managers [are] open for all kinds of development work, international cooperation and innovations" (ID6). Teacher 7 by contrast related the increase in her autonomy to the changes in assessment in the school: "We are moving from courses with tests into courses with no final tests, then you have more freedom - before that you were always preparing for the tests" (ID7).

The parents and students interviewed experienced little or no participation in the work on revising the study offer. Parent 14 reported that "they meet the head teacher," and said parents were informed about the study offer, but the Parent Council did not take a direct part in any decision making (ID14). Likewise, when students were asked about their participation or them bringing in ideas, they reported no involvement through the students' association or other channels: "Nothing, we have nothing to say about that" (ID10).

The National Curriculum Guide 2011

The National Curriculum Guide was high in the mind of school leaders and teachers for several reasons. To begin with, it was not published until a few years after the establishment of the new upper secondary law and, at that time, School D had already started to work on changes. The assistant head teacher recalled how these new instructions from the Ministry had a negative impact on teachers who had hitherto been "very positive and... very excited" (ID3):

> Then it started to come like these impositions from the Ministry - that this had to be and that had to be and so on, and then it died a bit, this great idea which was there in the beginning. [...] It came actually afterwards [the instructions] and killed a bit the spark in people, [...] How should the courses be?, What should their names be?, How many units should they be?, there were various such things that people could not figure out, and this was always coming bit by bit, and then the National Curriculum

> Guide, of course, didn't come until 2011, this general curriculum, and it had this effect that people were always waiting for something. (ID3)

This quote from the assistant head teacher suggests that things would have been easier for the school if the National Curriculum Guide had been issued earlier. Nevertheless, teachers had to absorb the new concepts and rewrite course descriptions in line with the new framework. The temporary head teacher recalled how demanding it was for teachers to get acquainted with the various new provisions of the National Curriculum Guide:

> People were very insecure with the wording in the curriculum around 'knowledge', 'skills' and 'competences', and the differences between them. It was a bit demanding for the teachers to get acquainted with this, and to envision their courses in this new system, but, when we started to work on this, then naturally the understanding increased. (ID2)

The new National Curriculum Guide also mandated that a new unit system had to be implemented, and the Ministry issued detailed instructions about how to give courses new names. Both the assistant head teacher and the curriculum manager said they found the new course unit system much less transparent for students than the former system. The assistant head teacher described her view as follows:

> I found these changes, when people suddenly started to change over to units and [qualification] levels, I felt that it was being destroyed, a system which we had been working on for many years and [which] told students very easily what path they should take to finish something. Now we have courses called STÆR1AJ05 - what does this tell the student? [...] In this new system, the problem is that it is so difficult for the student to see which way he is going, and this was quite simple under the older one. (ID3)

In addition, several school leaders and teachers found the approval process for new or revised study programmes overly complicated. Teacher 8 described how the revision of the content of the study programmes for certified trades was done collaboratively, so that once one school got approval for a revised programme then the other schools can use it as well. However, this proved to be a slow process:

> I see that now there are three proposals for these subjects, [...] I doubt that any of these has been approved - see they must go through the Directorate of Education and the occupational councils, [...]. I think the study programme from School A has reached the furthest, that it has entered the Ministry. (ID8)

This echoes the concerns of staff in School A who also found the process of getting approval for new or revised vocational study programmes complicated and slow as they

need to go to the Directorate of Education and the relevant occupational councils before they can be submitted to the MoE for approval.

The shortening of study time for matriculation

The requirement that schools shorten study time for matriculation to three years met opposition within School D. The temporary head teacher reported how it blended into opposition to the implementation of the new National Curriculum Guide:

> I think there was a bit of opposition to these changes, both that some did not want to shorten the schooling, there were many against that, and then the vocabulary which was used in the curriculum, they did not find themselves able to connect to it. (ID2)

The shortening of the study programmes from four years to three led to a reduction in the number of students in the school. All the school leaders highlighted how this made it more difficult to keep a diverse study offer, especially as the time dedicated to meeting University requirements made it more difficult to offer free selection in some programmes:

> [In] study programmes like the natural sciences [...] the university departments continue with the same requirements for their students, therefore there was very little free selection in that study programme, and they had little scope for changes. There are the most requirements in Science in University I think, so there was not much scope for changes there; however, it may be different with humanities and social sciences. (ID2)

The above quotes reveal that, while the school was given more autonomy, the shortening of the study time for matriculation led to less scope for School D to offer diverse study. Also considering the university requirement, the school's scope to utilise that autonomy to make changes became even narrower.

6.4.3 The impact of contextual factors on policy enactments in school

The interviews revealed three main themes regarding how factors in the school's context impacted the enactment of policy on school autonomy over the curriculum. The first one relates to professional beliefs and policy making in the school and describes school leaders' and teachers' views on changes in the school's curriculum. The second relates to the creation of new study within the financial framework and how this impacted the school's scope for change. The third theme addresses students' choice and describes the character of demands relating to the school and the study options available from the students' and parents' perspectives.

Professional beliefs and policy making

The policy on increased school autonomy over the curriculum created expectations within School D. The temporary head teacher recalled how staff started to work on changes right after the establishment of the new law in 2008: "It began as brainstorming about the dream school, what kind of school do we want" (ID2). However, this first attempt did not result in changes for a number of reasons, including a lack of instructions, and the work was put on hold for a while. The assistant head teachers recalled that when the work started again around 2014, a group within the school worked on the curriculum and proposed some radical ideas:

> There was a group working together on the curriculum and there was the idea to have a new students' term, as we named it: the term would be divided into smaller units and students would get to try the whole education offer in the school [by] rotating in short cycles. But then [some] people did not agree at all that this would be the right way, so this did not happen either. (ID3)

While radical changes to the school's study programme were proposed, most were never realised because of divided professional beliefs. As Teacher 6 recalled, "It was a bit disappointing that many of the great ideas that came up in the preparation did not come true; these were like totally out of the box" (ID6). Nevertheless, certain changes were made. The temporary head teacher described how the school's "conclusion became to do minor changes except to increase the free selection" (ID2) by offering an open study programme. This was one of the main ideas which emerged from the big meeting with school stakeholders in 2014, and there was a call for "more students' choice with the new curriculum, so it was also taken into account" (ID2). However, these changes were also disputed, as noted by the head teacher, "not everybody agreed, and they found this too much freedom" (ID1).

The emphasis on greater free selection is considered to have led to changes in students' choice; however, there were a number of consequences. As the temporary head teacher explained, "the greater free selection has led to students skipping certain subjects which are considered difficult" (ID2), and this had serious consequences for the existence of one of the school's strongest study programmes, as the head teacher pointed out:

> We saw that with this open study programme then it happened with the science subjects that they decreased, our natural science study programme was very strong, but suddenly it collapsed, this is of much concern. (ID1)

In addition, the impact of greater student choice at upper secondary level led to a response by the University of Iceland which forced a turnaround in the school's free selection policy. In 2017, the University made a list of various subjects and how many

units should be included for each subject in a matriculation examination. The head teacher thinks this happened because university teachers were not prepared for the changes the autonomy policy brought, and this was their response "when they realised that students would come with different preparation" to university (ID1). However, as the temporary head teacher recalled, "this proposal from the university... came far too late, [...] the university should have come up with this ... before the upper secondary schools started this work" (ID2). This left school leaders with little choice but to increase the compulsory elements, in line with the university requirements, and decrease the free selection.

As the temporary head teacher pointed out, these changes were also disputed by teachers, "with some find[ing] this a return to the past" (ID2). Teacher 6 was one of those who disagreed:

> It is this old thinking that I find and then comes some comparison to other schools, all the other schools are doing this. I ask myself, and not everyone agrees, why are we chasing it? And then we have the outside pressure from the society, from parents, from comparisons, and the competition between schools to get students, with preconceived ideas on what the matriculation should be, which was not exactly the idea I think, behind this new [policy], this school autonomy. (ID6)

This quote reveals how pressure from prevailing views on what kind of preparation is best for university is seen as in contrast to policy on school autonomy. Changes in vocational study were also disputed. Not everyone agreed that each school should develop their own vocational study programmes, and this was especially true of the certified trades. As the assistant head teacher put it:

> Why in our small country do we not have the same vocational study programmes in the whole country, because although we are talking about freedom, we do not need to take these study programmes in all directions - people are learning the same base for being a carpenter. (ID3)

The view that the study programme for certified trade should be the same in all schools was one of the reasons why School D cooperated with other schools in reviewing the content of their vocational study programmes.

The school's policy was to have diverse study assessment, with both summative and formative assessment. The trend had been that teachers were moving from the use of final tests to more formative assessment, and this was also what had been recommended by school leaders, but as reported by the head teacher in this area "teacher's autonomy is rather much." (ID1). School Board member 16 highlighted the relevance of formative assessment for life and work after school:

> I think that this development of formative assessment has been completely necessary, and a base for training people for life [after school] and going into the labour market - there is nowhere where you work for many months and then you just go for a one final test. (ID16)

However, as the head teacher pointed out, teachers have different views and subjects are different:

> We have been struggling a bit regarding tests, as teachers in science have different criteria and visons than many others [...] We have to somehow dare to face it that the autonomy of subjects must exist, and some things apply better in one place than others, and we need to be careful that one is not [considered] more remarkable than another because it is measured like that, but the attitude is still that science is something much more remarkable than something else. (ID1)

This quote suggests that whether final tests are used or not has implication for the perceived standing of subjects in School D. Final tests are mainly held in science subjects and teachers' autonomy over assessment might therefore lead to that hierarchy of subjects being maintained.

The above quotes shed light on how the professional context of the school impacted policy making on curriculum changes. Of concern is how teachers divided professional beliefs made it difficult for school leaders to reach a shared view on the school's policy on its study offer.

Financial framework

One of the prominent themes which emerged from interviews was the need for restraint in financial matters. As the temporary head teacher noted, the policy on increased school autonomy was not followed with extra finance, and this limited the scope for possible changes:

> If we were to offer new study programmes and there is no extra finance, and, of course, vocational study is more expensive, there are fewer students [...] this has not changed, so this is not complete autonomy in this respect. (ID2)

The temporary head teacher also highlighted how housing and equipment matter for changes in the content and offer of vocational studies:

> I think the vocational study is rather similar, but, actually, [...] [vocational study] teachers may have been going a bit in different directions, and then, because of new equipment, amongst other things, and [because] we've got this new vocational housing, [then] one can see the difference

> between schools - some are maybe with older equipment and that naturally affects the content of the courses. (ID2)

The temporary head teacher also pointed out that the school had been dealing with a financial deficit at the time when they were working on reviewing the education offer. This meant that time spent on project management had to be cut, so "the projects just piled up in fewer hands" (ID2). At a time when more scope for leadership was needed, the school had to cut administration costs, leading to an increased workload for staff.

The dispute over teachers' wages and the teachers' collective agreement with the government in 2014 was another obstacle which influenced morale and work on changes within the school. Teacher 6 recalled how the new wage contract came at the same the school was implementing the new National Curriculum Guide and working on the school's policy on its education offer:

> The work on the curriculum and the school's policy on one hand and the idea behind the wage contract on the other hand, ... this blended together damaged the atmosphere in the school. [...] The job evaluation influenced the good morale which had been built up regarding new ways to go, and then people started to think, this is so much work and [things] like that. (ID6)

This quote from Teacher 6 suggests that the new job evaluation which followed the wage contract worked as a barrier to more flexibility in teachers' work, especially as roles were now required to be broken down more precisely than before. In addition, part of the new agreement involved a new criterion for minimum and maximum numbers of students in class, and this made the operation of the school more complicated. As the head teacher explained:

> Now we are always in this conflict, what [courses] shall we allow to continue, and this has also to do with the wages and how the job evaluation has changed. [...] Before we could have a group of ten in an academic course because another group was larger and pulled the cost up, [as] we got more units for the larger group - this is not possible today, [...] because when students become many then we are paying more to the teacher and thereby this does not go into the operation. (ID1)

In ending the possibility of cross-subsidising smaller courses, the new wage contract and the job evaluation appear to have limited the school's autonomy to offer more diverse courses.

The decrease in student numbers as a result of shortening the study time for matriculation also had financial implications for the school, potentially affecting its ability to provide a strong education offer. While School D cooperates with schools in

different parts of the country, no cooperation exists with the grammar school in the same region, leading to competition to attract sufficient students for courses to run:

> Specially now, when there are fewer [numbers] in the schools and to be able to keep a good education offer, then naturally you need a certain number of students, and it is totally clear that this has led to [a lack of cooperation] between schools, [...] for example, I am not in any real cooperation with XXXX [the grammar school] which is half an hour away - we are in competition for students, that is no secret. (ID1)

This quote suggests that increased school autonomy might have led to more competition between schools and less cooperation. In addition, the small local population, and the implications for the school's policy of using autonomy to work for diverse education was at the forefront of the head teacher's mind:

> I do not see in this society, this development that is ongoing that we do not need to merge some schools, these are too expensive solutions to operate like this, [...] this is the big political issue at upper secondary level now. [...] A few days ago, I met a head teacher for a small school and she said, this is not working, with this finance we get allocated and trying to offer diverse study. (ID1)

A financial model which depends on student numbers makes it challenging for small schools to offer diverse education for students. In sparsely populated rural areas, even those close to the capital region, it becomes even more difficult for the policy on school autonomy to function as intended and provide increased or equalised access to a more diverse education.

Students' and parents' choice

It was noticeable that all the parents who were interviewed wanted their children to be able to choose between schools. Parent 14 thinks this relates to students wanting to have the freedom to select other options, beyond simply staying with the same student group as in elementary school:

> I think that it is in many kids, this freedom to have a choice and if you can choose a school then you just choose a school [...] I think they have become bored; they have been with this class for ten years and many of them even [together] in pre-primary school, this is just enough, maybe one wants to flourish somewhere else in a different group. (ID14)

One option is for students to go to school in the capital; however, as Student 12 pointed out, not all students can get into every school in the capital: "If we just take these classic Reykjavíkur schools, not everyone gets in because of grades" (ID12). Student 12 is here referring to the highly selective schools in the capital.

Prominent in students' discussion was how they based their choice of study on their interests and aptitude for either natural or social science in elementary school. Student 10 reported: "I have always been stronger in social science than natural science, it can be seen in my grades" (ID10). Student 11, meanwhile, had considered studying to be an electrician but choose an open study programme for matriculation instead, partly to keep future options open:

> I chose the open study programme because I had no strong preferences, and chose courses I thought were useful and which fit my interests, like languages. [...] I am just going to reach the matriculation and try to go for university, but the electrician is like semi plan B. (ID11)

This quote suggests that when students are uncertain about their choices they tend to go for the matriculation and more general study rather than specific vocational programmes. As in other schools, this may be influenced by parental expectations; however, the students generally described the support from their parents with their choice of study as encouragement rather than pressure. Student 12 explained that his mother "would completely understand if I had some plan to do something else [...] but you know it is like the focus to reach the matriculation" (ID12). Parents and students also felt that lack of knowledge about the subjects on offer at upper secondary school, especially the vocational courses, affected students' choices. As Student 12 explained, "We are raised up with academic studies, [so] we do not actually know about the advantages of going into the others," and both parents and students thought that the diverse course offer needed to be better introduced at elementary level so students could make more informed choices.

Difficulty accessing suitable housing now there was no dormitory run by School D was identified as a significant obstacle to students' exercising choice. Student 10 reported that some students were now travelling more than 100 km each day as rental costs had increased due to tourism:

> Number one, two and three, in this school, there are kids [...] driving back and forth each day, [now there] is not a dormitory, they are driving 150 km each day. [...] It is enormously difficult to rent an apartment, and still there are 150 small apartments for Airbnb that are for tourists. (ID10)

The lack of dormitory accommodation was also high in parents' minds, especially as it means parents need to drive students to school until they get their driving licence. This can have an impact on their own working patterns, as Parent 13 explained: "We have been driving him daily, but it does not fit well with farming" (ID13). Students can take a bus to School D, however, this only runs at specific times, so students who want to take part in extra-curricular activities after school depend on their parents to drive them. For Parent 15, this limits students' ability to participate:

> I do not find he has this freedom when he is 16 years old, this extra-curricular activity together with study, they go to school and home … and then they are bound by the parents to drive back and forth. (ID15)

Despite concerns such as those mentioned above, students consider that the education offer in School D is diverse and the school is open for all students: "Everybody can get into School D and it is teaching most of the subjects" (ID12). However, in the case of some vocational study programmes, students must go to the capital area, or elsewhere, to finish the final year. As one student put it: "At least there is a base for everything [in School D], and then you might maybe need to go to the Technical School [Large vocational school in the capital]" (ID10). Parent 14 thinks there could be more certified trades on offer in the school, given the issues associated with travelling and living away from home:

> It depends on whether you are interested in mechanics or electronics or hairdressing - there is nothing else you can go into, [...] And when they [students] are 16 and maybe 17, then they have actually no choice of going to Reykjavík; it is not until they reach legal age of majority, 18, that they can take care of themselves. (ID14)

Parent 13 also noted that it costs more to study far away from home, "so that the choice is very much about how prosperous we are" (ID13). Parent 14 also felt that the need to commute limited students' options: "The choice is nothing because it takes almost two hours to drive to school in the capital" (ID14). Despite the efforts of staff in School D to provide a diverse study offer, it is seen as less than in the capital area, with various barriers to access leading students and parents to feel they have less choice than those who live in the Reykjavík area.

6.4.4 The new policy in relation to school leaders' and teachers' working environment

The school leaders and teachers raised various issues related to the policy on school autonomy and its impact on their working environment. Prominent themes were educational responsibility and resource management and teachers' autonomy and job security.

Educational responsibility and resource management

The policy on school autonomy has increased the responsibility of those who work in schools. The head teacher in School D described this as demanding for schools and thinks they have been put in a difficult position, asked to make changes in isolation, without reference to elementary schools or universities:

> This is, to some extent, very great and challenging, but, on the contrary, also a huge responsibility for the schools [...] because upper secondary

> school teachers and school leaders are not very well informed about what has been going on in the elementary schools, and the curriculum there, and each one has his own way through the university but does not know the overall picture of the university, so I felt it, at that time, a very strange decision to take the upper secondary school and put [it] in this difficult situation to change somehow out of context with the other school levels. (ID1)

This quote illustrates the view that the responsibility given to the upper secondary schools might have been unrealistic and a more comprehensive approach, involving consultation between school levels, would have been better. The head teacher also thinks that more guidance and support from the MoE would have been helpful:

> I would, of course, have wanted to see more support and discussion and more scope for cooperation with educational authorities because we are often struggling with some thoughts and are seeking support from the Ministry with it; [however], I find the communication with the Ministry is too focused on financial matters. (ID1)

In line with the head teacher in School C, this head also thought more professional discussion on education policies was needed, and also more continuity, so that policies are not so heavily influenced by political priorities:

> More professional discussion is needed, we are always, when a new minister comes then one is going to change everything, we must have some flow in this, [...] we must have it [the policy] solid, not coloured by this or that politics but more related to social development and global development. (ID1)

Prominent in school leaders' discussion was how the policy on school autonomy is particularly perceived as increased responsibility for preparing students for university. This was highlighted by the temporary head teacher:

> We want, of course, to prepare young people so that they will be ready to learn what they want at university. [...] It is quite a big responsibility which we got, to have this much freedom to change things, and it is a disadvantage that the impact of the changes may become apparent quite late, you have maybe been running a system for several years which then appears not to be working, then I am meaning the curriculum of individual schools and also the shortening and everything that followed. I think it would be very useful [...] if there would be research on students' progress in university. (ID2)

This quote indicates that more feedback and research is needed on changes made by the schools. However, school leaders were in general not supportive of standardised

tests as a way of measuring students' attainment, although different views existed. The assistant head teacher considered opposition to standardised tests has to do with how the results are used: "One finds that the discussion about the results, that it would always be on comparing schools, who are the best" (ID3). She explained that tests results often relate more to schools' intake polices, with the highly selective schools recruiting stronger academic students who are more likely to have better results: "School XXX is not like us taking in all students, [...] it takes the elite in, therefore this is so disputed" (ID3). Nevertheless, as School Board member 17 pointed out, they can help schools benchmark themselves, and, potentially, enhance their reputations:

> I do not like standardised tests, however it can sometimes be good in some core subjects just for the people themselves to see where they stand, and also for the school to do good in this competition; we always hear from time to time from some studies where schools are, where the university declares that students are differently well prepared when they start university. (ID17)

School Board member 17 is referring to the regular analysis[28] conducted by the University of Iceland where students' grades within the various university faculties are ranked according to the upper secondary schools they graduated from. He thinks standardised tests might help School D to do better in this regard. However, interviews in School D revealed no discussion about internal and external evaluation related to increased need for feedback and measurements of the quality of schooling.

It was clear from the interviews that school leaders view it as their responsibility to offer vocational study programmes in line with both the needs of students and the labour market. For example, a new basic hairdressing programme was started in School D to meet the needs of students for more diverse vocational study. However, according to the temporary head teacher, there were doubts about the constancy of demand for such a specialised study programme: "One does not know, when the demand runs out, what happens then - it is naturally difficult to offer such specialised study where the market is small" (ID2). This was an issue when a study programme in food technology and tourism was developed to meet local labour market needs:

> Like I say, there is much tourism in the region and much agriculture [...], but we got into trouble with that study programme; we were able to offer it twice, but then there was a lack of students choosing it. (ID2)

[28] In 2012, the results from this survey were reported in the national news; however, they are mainly just reported in the annual meetings between the University of Iceland and school leaders from upper secondary schools. https://www.visir.is/g/2012705189983

The assistant head teacher thinks that part of the reason for this is that employers don't really value the shorter vocational study programmes, and this discourages students from choosing them:

> I think it is needed that the employment system values these study programmes, that students who attend they get opportunities in the labour market and get a bit higher salary. (ID3)

As these quotes demonstrate, one of the challenges of utilising school autonomy to introduce new study programmes is in meeting both students' demands and the needs of the labour market.

Policy on school autonomy has also created challenges in the field of human resource management. When the school decided to increase free selection, there was agreement that this would be done without compulsory redundancies; however, a reduction in staffing was needed, and, as the temporary head teacher explained, this led to competition between teachers over who taught the most popular course and who would keep their jobs:

> With the open study programme, to have such much freedom, we went for the smallest core, according to the National Curriculum Guide, and it was also agreed not to make decisions which would influence the job of individual teachers, that it would be needed to dismiss many teachers. But then this created competition between the subjects - is that some better way to decide who keeps his job or not, and it is so difficult in the operation [of the school] to have these fluctuations. (ID2)

The quote reveals some doubts about whether competition between teachers based on the number of students choosing their courses was a better way than the school leaders deciding who would keep their jobs. However, as the temporary head teacher acknowledged, the change in the course offer led to a need for more versatile teachers:

> I would say that the shortening and this new system demands more versatile teachers, because these smaller subjects where there was enough teaching for one teacher before, now he needs to be able to teach something else; upper secondary school teachers today need to be a bit more versatile. (ID2)

This suggests that while the autonomy policy has led to more choice for students, free selection means some teachers now teach subjects outside their speciality in order to keep full-time jobs.

As was the case in other schools, interviews with school leaders in School D also revealed concerns regarding the supply and quality of study materials due to the

changes in the content of study programmes. The head teacher reported that this varied between subjects:

> The problem is maybe smallest in the languages and Icelandic, because it is so easy to approach material, but in history for example, business, and economics, it is known that material is needed, [and] the maths [department] is always complaining [...]. The vocational study is teaching partly from books that were made last century [...] and much more finance is needed to publish good teaching material in Icelandic at the same time, and we are always worried about our language. (ID1)

The temporary head teacher explained that the supply of study material impacts the school's potential to change the content of study, limiting its scope to develop:

> A teacher should be able, as a professional, to pick material from different sources, but it is still a challenge. The schools cannot just throw everything out and do everything new without having any study material, it will not work, but in maths for example it would have to use the same books as other schools. (ID2)

While teachers are trusted to select teaching material from different sources, for example the internet, or to create new material themselves, textbooks must still be available, especially as not all teachers have the confidence to write their own study material:

> I think teacher who do not trust themselves for that work, they maybe keep things unchanged regarding the teaching material, [...] like I say, it depends a bit on the teachers, because naturally if one thinks about the job evaluation, where is this in the job evaluation? (ID2)

This quote also raises the issue of time and payment for the extra work involved in changing the study content.

Teachers' autonomy and job security

Teachers' perceptions of what the policy meant for their autonomy at work varied. Many expressed the view that it depends on each teacher whether autonomy is used to change the content of study and teaching. As Teacher 5 said, "some do not want to take that ball, do not have time, or do not trust themselves [...] I think it just varies by individual" (ID5). However, Teacher 9 thinks this is mainly to do with older teachers who have almost finished their career: "They were just quitting and not ready to change" (ID9), and Teacher 7 also noted a difference in teachers' responses to increased autonomy related to their age: "It is not easy to change for people who have been teaching for a long time; [...] that is the advantage of young teachers, that they

enjoy the new" (ID7). She also thinks that teachers have been given a bit too much freedom, without an overarching framework to operate within:

> I feel this is maybe a bit too much; the overall system should have a slightly stronger framework. It is very good to have a certain freedom to organise the teaching of each course, and what you do as such, but the content could be the same between schools, [...] see, it is impossible [for students] to move between schools. (ID7)

This view that it might be better to have centralised curriculum for subjects, while allowing teachers autonomy over how they approach teaching, relates to two difference issues, both of which were raised in other schools. The first is that the variation in courses between schools is believed to have made it difficult for students to change school; the second is the extra work involved in finding relevant teaching material or writing new material. As Teacher 7 pointed out:

> When one started then one got a teaching plan, books and slides. But, now everything is new, [there are] almost no textbooks, every [bit of] study material, [of] teaching material, this has to be looked for and that is enormous work. [...] And, this is of course, a bit of duplication, [because] it is no longer possible to publish textbooks. (ID7)

As discussed in other schools, the diversity between schools in how teachers organise the content of their subjects makes it more difficult to issue textbooks, shifting responsibility to produce material onto the teaching staff.

However, the interviews suggested that this may not be the case for all teachers, notably those who teach certified trades. Teacher 8, for example, experienced little change in her professional autonomy, partly because of the difficulties involved in changing the study programmes for certified trades and the need to collaborate with other schools:

> I imagine that it [the policy] can be very exciting for the school, but on the other hand, it is just like that we have to follow a certain curriculum and work according to that, and I find, we are also in cooperation with three other comprehensive schools. (ID8)

When schools cooperate on changes in the content in study programmes, there is less scope for individual teachers to come up with changes. Changes in the content of certified trades are also, to some extent, dependent on the renewal of tools and devices; however, Teacher 8 thinks this must be followed by updating teachers' knowledge about these devices:

> I think what is missing into all of this, is that when there has been much change in tools and devices, then finance is needed to update the teacher to learn the devices. (ID8)

Teacher 8 also thinks more discussion is needed between teachers in each of the certified trades within the school, ideally with the support of a professional manager:

> It has been very hard to get teachers, who are teaching the same field, to meet regularly and discuss the study together. There was a professional manager for the whole [of] vocational studies, but it was only this fall that there was a specific professional manager for X [another certified trade], it is not [yet] for Y [his certified trade] [...] [but] it is always being asked for. (ID8)

The need for teachers' cooperation and professional management along with continuing professional development was high in the mind of Teacher 8, and it seems that these three factors are believed to matter for professional autonomy to become reality.

The teachers interviewed in School D were not in favour of standardised tests for various reasons. Chief among these was the belief that such tests would be incompatible with the policy on school autonomy, as, for example, noted by Teacher 7:

> It would have to reorganise the whole system so everybody would be doing the same [thing] everywhere, [...] then you have naturally narrowed the school, then, of course, books would be printed [...], standardised tests are naturally very controlling for schoolwork, because there comes a standardised judgement. (ID7)

Teacher 6 thinks it would be fairer to focus on students' progress when comparing schools and thinks the policy on school autonomy supports such an approach to students' achievement:

> I have always been very happy with this school because we welcome everyone; I think there are many that are more focused on added value in education, and I think the opening [provided by the policy] helps with that. (ID6)

However, Teacher 8 still deals with standardised tests for the certified trades, and she described how narrow and rigid the journeyman's examination is.

> You see how narrow the system is. I was teaching the final project for X [her certified trade] as an example, and there are students who are going

> into the journeyman's examination and there they must answer 50 questions. It is a written test and a practical test also, and when I contacted Iðan Education Centre,[29] who take care of the journeyman's examination, [to ask] if I could get ideas on questions that could come up, [the answer was] 'No'. (ID8)

Teacher 8 had tried to get information from the agency which manages the journeyman's examinations without success. She has, therefore, collected questions herself to better prepare students for the examination:

> I have made myself a list after all these years. I was that lucky that there were, of course, plenty of ideas of questions in the school, and I put them together in a book. I think that the structure of the study, it is controlled by this final test to some extent, [but] you don't get data on what is being tested, and I do not find that it is being updated. (ID8)

The above quotes indicate that the standardised nature of the journeyman's examinations has a controlling effect on how vocational courses are taught in the school.

Another key theme in the teachers' discussion was how changes in the course offer impacted their job security. Teacher 6 described how the school's focus on more free selection enabled teachers to come up with ideas for new courses: "We just give it to the curriculum manager – a course description and report - and get either 'No' or 'Go ahead', and then it is just, if you walk the halls, then you see the advertisements from us" (ID6). However, when the study time for matriculation was shortened and student numbers reduced, there were consequences for teachers who relied on free selection for full-time jobs. As Teacher 9 reported: "We have to, actually, fight internally for students, you know when the study was shortened to three years then it becomes just less free selection within the school" (ID9). Teacher 7 described how her subject was taken out of the core curriculum at the time, but was later put back:

> It was taken out, it was just a free selection; [however,] now it is in the core in the open study programme [...] the university required that [...] [it] would be taught, the University of Iceland. (ID7)

[29] The Upper Secondary School Education Act allows the Ministry of Education to use independent parties, such as independent educators in the labour market, to implement the Journeyman examinations. Iðan Education Centre is a private, not for profit education and training provider, and its role is to increase the competence of companies and employees in industry. https://www.idan.is/um-okkur/english/

This quote also demonstrates the university's influence on the schools' policy on course offer, although, in this case, it had a positive impact on the job security of Teacher 7.

6.4.5 The new policy and changes for students

The data analysis revealed two main themes related to what the policy on school autonomy might or might not have accomplished for students. The first concerns increased choice and diversity, the second the consequences of shortening the study time for matriculation.

Increased choice and diversity

The head teacher considers the school's focus on free selection in the study programmes for matriculation is meeting the needs of more students and enabling more of them to matriculate:

> I can see they have a lot of language and Icelandic, and their interest is met. Although they are on the open study programme, there are those who are maybe uncertain and maybe not with a strong base, [but] they have the opportunity to finish matriculation without going too deeply into something. (ID1)

The temporary head teacher thinks this might also have led to fewer dropouts; however, there are still some concerns about whether students are well enough prepared for university:

> At least regarding keeping them here in the school, but what one is not as sure about is the continuation, like the university, how they will do there? But students' autonomy is very present here with us, [and] I think there are not many schools with that much free selection. (ID2)

The interviews indicate that the students in School D experience the free selection units as a little easier than the compulsory core units, and Parent 14 was concerned that, while free selection is good for some, it might not be demanding enough for others:

> I think at least the open study programme for matriculation sounds a bit like diluted study, [...] they can take easier courses and be faster in getting course units and become students in almost no time somehow. So, the free selection has maybe become a bit too open, which maybe helps some but is maybe not stretching others, who could have done much more than they did. (ID14)

This belief that too much free selection might have reduced the quality of matriculation appears to have been shared by the University of Iceland, leading the school to revise its policy. As the assistant head teacher noted:

> We are actually withdrawing, because the free selection became too much in our opinion. [...] The university made a specific claim [about] what they wanted to see that students had finished when they came to university, and it became rather controlling, naturally. [...] This related to [the idea] that people had become so free and people would be missing certain bases when they came to university. (ID3)

Here again, the need to meet the demands of the university have had a direct impact on students' choice.

However, one area where student choice was clearly expanded was in the creation of a new upper secondary study programme which, like the open study programme, is believed to have reduced the number of dropouts. As the temporary head teacher explained:

> We have a new programme for students who do not fulfil the requirements for study programmes for matriculation or the vocational study programmes. There is more support [...] more communication with parents, and we see that the drop-out rate is lower with this group than before. (ID2)

Students' choice of shorter vocational study programmes had also increased with the advent of the basic hairdressing programme and the basic study programme in food technology and tourism. The curriculum manager also explained how a more comprehensive study offer for certified trades now means fewer students have to go to other schools to complete their final year: "Now they can finish mechanics with us and the electricians programme; this was the last year, they had been going to Reykjavík to do that" (ID4).

However, neither parents nor students had experienced much change in the actual content of the education provided. This applied to both academic and vocational study. Student 10, for example, has the same English teacher his mother had, and their experiences seemed very similar: "We were comparing it and it was exactly same, just the study material and how it is taught" (ID10). Parent 14, who has a son in mechanics, reported: "My husband did the same thing 20 years ago as my son is doing now, and... with exactly the same books - I think this is special" (ID14). The possibility that some courses had not changed as a result of the new policy was acknowledged in the discussion with school leaders:

> In some departments, [...] there were some substantial changes, but, in others, it was almost just changes in the names of the courses and the content is similar, or even the same; I could believe that there were more who just transferred this between. [ID4]

Although School leader 4 thinks many teachers have not changed the content of existing courses, the use of free selection in School D allowed teachers to develop new courses. As the temporary head teacher noted: "Because there was much greater free selection for students than before, it created scope for teachers to make new courses, electives, and interdisciplinarity" [ID2].

As in other schools, all the participants mentioned that the increased diversity in the study offer has made the evaluation of study when students move between schools more difficult. Teacher 5 pointed out that "this has just become a much more complicated and non-transparent system than before" [ID5]. For School Board member 18 this is even more difficult when students move from a comprehensive school to a grammar school where students in the same study programme stay in general in same class the whole study time.

> This does make it more difficult, especially to go over to a grammar school; in the comprehensive system you can adapt a bit more, you can drop into certain study programme. [ID18]

However, Student 12 thinks the problem also applies when moving within the comprehensive system: "I think it's between all schools - I have heard many examples about that" [ID12].

School D had been evolving into more use of formative assessment, but final tests still exist in some subjects. However, Student 11 reported that the arrangement of study assessments in some subjects now meant that students who did well in the formative assessments could skip the final test. "In many courses it is formative assessment, but if you do not pass then you go for a final test" [ID11]. This divided opinions among parents about the benefit for students. While Parent 13 thought that "It should be assessment for learning, [because] it would work against drop-out" [ID13], Parents 14 and 15 think both testing methods are needed to be prepared for future studies: "I think both are needed; students need to learn to take final tests because when they go to university, then they just take all kind of tests" [ID14].

The consequences of shortening the study time for matriculation

The shortening of the study time for matriculation is believed to have impacted students' study in School D. The assistant head teacher pointed out that the need to fit 200 units of study into three years had affected students' choice: "I think this has increased the load on students, and they choose much more practical study; they don't go as much into the free selection" [ID4]. The students agreed that the reduction from four years to three years gave them less scope to choose from the free selection. Student 12 noted:

> Now it has become that you take the core [subjects], and, somehow, the free selection is a bit linked to the core [...] But you don't have as much choice to try other ways and relate it [study] to your interests. [ID12]

Students also think that the study has to some extent been compressed to fit into the new timeframe, increasing their workload and leaving less time for extra-curricular activities. Student 10 reported: "The pages were not decreased, and one can see it; it has reduced all extra- curricular activities in upper secondary schools" [ID10]. Student 10 also highlighted how these changes have led to increased stress: "Everybody is anxious about this; they can't do it if they are in the three-year system, practicing sport and working too - everybody is just burning out" [ID10]. However, as Student 12 pointed out, students in the comprehensive system had the option to finish their study in less than four years and many did:

> You could finish earlier, but now actually, three years are the norm [...] some speculate just ok how many friends of mine will be here next term, [...] nobody wants to be alone in a school to finish and also it naturally has decreased by one cohort. [ID12]

Despite the flexibility of the comprehensive system for students to graduate within different time frames, it seems that there is more pressure to finish earlier as three years is now the norm.

6.4.6 Summary

Findings from the case study of School D raise various issues. The first overarching theme on how participants interpreted school autonomy from policy documents suggests mixed messages. As in the other schools, while the new law was perceived as an opportunity to adapt the study offer to meet the needs of different communities, the National Curriculum Guide was perceived as imposing limitations, and the approval process was experienced as long and complicated, particularly, in the case of vocational study programmes. Furthermore, the requirement to shorten the study time for matriculation reduced the scope for the school to offer diverse courses because it reduced the number of students in the school.

The second main theme was on the impact of three contextual factors on policy enactment in the school. Firstly, findings show how divided beliefs in the professional context of School D created challenges for policy making on what the study offer should be. This related both to how much free selection students should have and how much the focus should be on meeting the requirements from the university. In the case of certified trades, the issue raised was that they needed to be the same for all schools, so there was no real scope for autonomy. Secondly, findings show how the financial framework and the issue of facilities had a significant impact on the school's capacity for change. This was particularly pertinent to vocational studies, where appropriate workshop space and equipment are a prerequisite for an increased study offer or changes in content. The criteria in the new job evaluation following the teachers' wage contract negotiations in 2014 and the shortening of the study time for matriculation had also narrowed the school's ability to change the course offer. The third contextual factor

was the students' demand for school and study. Findings suggest, to some extent, a disparity between policy aims on meetings students' differing aims and needs and the reality surrounding students' choice. Despite the diverse study offer in School D, students find their choice is limited. This seems to relate to students' desire to have the option of choosing between schools and how they find their choice of study is less compared to those who live in the capital area. Prominent too was how students in rural areas, even those close to the capital, experience obstacles because of the distances between school and home. In addition, findings reveal how factors such as students' experience from elementary school and access to university seem to influence their choice of academic study programmes above vocational study.

The third theme was on the new policy in relation to school leaders' and teachers' working environment. School leaders perceive their responsibility very much as preparing students for university and participation in working life; however, there was a feeling that more professional discussion, support and feedback is needed. The policy has also created challenges in the field of matching the study offer to the students' needs and those of the labour market, and in managing human resources. Although teachers' autonomy to make changes in the content of their subjects has increased; it was clear that how much that autonomy is used depends on each individual teacher. For those who use their autonomy to make changes, it inevitably leads to an increased workload, especially work on preparing new study material. In addition, the policy may have had different implications for the autonomy of some teachers, for example teachers in certified trades appear to be in a different position compared to teachers in other subjects. The policy on school autonomy is also believed to have had an impact on teachers' job security.

The fourth theme was on the new policy and the changes it brought for students. Findings revealed to some extent divided opinions. For example, while some considered the open study programme is better meeting students' needs, others were concerned that so much free selection would mean students were not well enough prepared for university. While the scope to provide more comprehensive certified trades programmes means fewer students need to leave to finish their studies, the evaluation of study between schools is believed to have become more difficult. Finally, the shortening of the study time for matriculation is believed to have led to less scope for free selection, less time for extra-curricular activities and increased stress among students.

7 Findings – cross-case analysis

This chapter presents the findings from the cross-case analysis. These are organised around four overarching themes which emerged from the case studies of the four schools: a) contradictions in the policy - mixed messages, b) policy making in schools – a complex interplay of contextual factors, c) policy consequences - issues and tensions in working contexts, and d) accomplished for students - different effects in different contexts. Each overarching theme is paired with one of the research questions in the discussion below; however, the enactment of the policy on school autonomy is a complex phenomenon and some overlap between themes is inevitable. Therefore, while each theme is mapped to a particular research question, contributions from other themes are also discussed.

7.1 Contradictions in the policy – mixed messages

The first overarching theme which emerged from cross analysis of the four cases was 'contradictions in the policy - mixed messages'. Three subthemes were identified within this theme, two of which refer to policy documents (the 2008 Act and the National Curriculum Guide [2011]), and one which relates to the decision to shorten the study time for matriculation from four years to three. Findings from cross analysis of this theme is intended to contribute to the answer to the first research question: *How did school leaders and teachers interpret the meaning of school autonomy as the policy was enacted within schools?* As explained in Chapter Three, while the meaning of school autonomy as a concept can be understood as organisational autonomy (Verhoest et al., 2004) this study focuses on the *who* and *what* of autonomy in line with arguments made by Bullock & Thomas (2002) and Simkins (1997).

7.1.1 The Upper Secondary Education Act 2008

School leaders from each school interpreted the policy on school autonomy over curriculum development within their local contexts. They described the policy as placing significant trust in schools, being open, and granting them freedom, opportunity, and authority to make changes. However, although all the school leaders expressed similar about the importance of using this autonomy to adapt to societal changes and meet students' different needs, the advantage of being able to meet the needs of the local community and the local economy appeared to be more significant for participants from the schools in the countryside.

In all four cases, it was evident that the policy was interpreted as a transfer of power from the MoE to head teachers. This was due to the fact that the final decision on the

study offer and what courses will be taught became the responsibility of the head teacher, regardless of how democratic the decision-making process had been previously. While school board members reported taking part in general discussions about changes, they thought that initiatives for change should come from professionals within the schools. Parents and students interviewed also reported experiencing little or no participation in policy making on changes in study offers.

Teachers in general considered their autonomy to change the content of their subjects had increased due to the less prescriptive curriculum; however, at the same time, most of them reported little actual change with the advent of the policy. Many felt they already had significant freedom to choose teaching material and how to approach teaching, and some related their autonomy to trust and encouragement from school leaders and a lack of interference with their work rather than the introduction of the policy.

7.1.2 The National Curriculum Guide 2011

The delay between the introduction of the new Act in 2008 and the publication of the new National Curriculum Guide in 2011 caused significant issues for some of the schools. According to the 2008 Act, schools were supposed to issue new study programmes descriptions by the autumn of 2011. However, these programmes were supposed to be structured in line with the new Guide, and that was not available until 2011. This meant that schools either had to delay work on utilising the new autonomy until clear instructions were published or to rely on information from preparatory work on the Guide. In School D, for example, this led to the school putting its policy work on hold for a while. The Icelandic parliament extended the deadline for the new study programme descriptions in 2010, giving schools until 2015. However, when the final version of the Guide was issued, schools found it was narrower than earlier drafts had indicated and gave them less scope for change. Interviewees in School C, for example, pointed out that the school's autonomy had been constrained by the increased requirements to teach Nordic languages and a third foreign language, and restrictions on how much sport was allowed.

Common to many participants in the three well-established schools and, to a lesser extent, in the new school, was the feeling that following the Guide increased bureaucracy and made administration more complicated. Participants described the various criteria, concepts, and templates for competence-based learning as complex and restraining, and the need to write descriptions for courses and study programmes in line with these provisions was seen by many as increasing bureaucracy. The main difference between schools in this regard was that teachers in the new school appeared to adopt the provisions of the new Guide more easily. One explanation given was the fact that everything in the school was new, so staff did not experience the issues associated with trying to fit existing content into a new framework.

Participants from all three well-established schools also described the process for getting approval from the MoE for new or revised study programmes as time consuming and bureaucratic. The study programmes had first to be entered into a central database and then reviewed by the Directorate of Education, and vocational study programmes also had to be reviewed by the relevant occupational councils. Participants in both School A and School B reported doubts about the actual autonomy given to schools due to these onerous confirmation processes; for them, autonomy meant that schools could be constantly developing and reviewing their study offers to respond to changing needs. Even in the case of the new school, which had new study programmes from the beginning, staff reported increased workloads due to registering courses in the official database. In addition, interviewees from all four schools reported that the new naming system and local changes in courses reduced transparency and comparability, making it more difficult to evaluate students' prior learning if they moved to another school.

7.1.3 The shortening of study time for matriculation

Another contradiction which emerged related to the requirement that study time for matriculation should be shortened from four years to three. The new Guide specified that study for matriculation should be between 200-240 units, or between three to four years, on the basis that 60 units corresponded to one year of full-time study. This was intended to offer schools flexibility in terms of the number of units in their study programmes. However, participants from all schools stated that the MoE had determined that three years' study corresponded to 200 units, meaning that students would need to do more than 'full-time' study each year. Participants in the three well-established schools reported experiencing opposition in the schools to the shortening of the study time for matriculation as a result, and that it was perceived as a top-down decision which appeared to contradict the move to greater autonomy.

The requirement to shorten study programmes also affected schools in different ways. School C, the new school, had organised study programmes as three years from the beginning, so there was no need to change their existing study offer. However, participants from the comprehensive schools, School A and School D, reported that the pressure of working on this had dominated their response to the various initiatives in the new Guide and their policy work revising their study offers. In addition, school leaders in School D, the comprehensive school in the countryside, reported experiencing a reduction in student numbers as a result of the initiative, making it more difficult for them to maintain a diverse study offer. In School B, by contrast, the pressure to shorten study for matriculation was utilised to positive effect to restart the school's previous work on changing their study offer.

The above analysis of three subthemes suggests that, although many interviewees interpreted the policy as offering schools considerable autonomy, they experienced

some contradictions and mixed messages when attempting to exercise that autonomy, notably in relation to the implementation of the new Guide and the demand to shorten the study time for matriculation. These findings suggest a disparity between participants' interpretation of policy documents and how they experienced the reality of school autonomy when enacting policy in their local contexts.

7.2 Policy making in schools – a complex interplay of contextual factors

The second overarching theme which emerged from cross analysis of the four cases was policy making in schools and the complex interplay of contextual factors involved. Three subthemes emerged within this theme: divided professional beliefs, financial challenges and barriers, and disparity between policy intentions and the reality of students' choice. Findings from cross analysis of this theme are intended to contribute to the answer to the second research question: *How did different contextual factors affect schools' ability to respond to the policy on increased school autonomy?*

7.2.1 Divided professional beliefs

A prominent factor in shaping the schools' responses to the policy on curriculum autonomy was the interplay between professional beliefs among school leaders and teachers and other factors in the schools' contexts. Cross analysis revealed both similarities and differences between schools in this regard.

Opinions within the well-established schools were divided on what their policies should be regarding curriculum changes. In School A and School D, the two comprehensive schools, the main division seemed to be to what extent the emphasis should be placed on broader study and more free selection, on one hand, or greater depth in subjects on the other. The broader approach was seen as a better way to meet students' different interests and needs and enable more of them to finish matriculation, whereas the option to focus on subjects in more depth was seen as better preparation for university study. In School A, this also related to concerns about the potential impact on the school's reputation if their matriculation programme was not seen as sufficiently rigorous and the resulting stratification in students' choice of school. In contrast to the comprehensive schools, participants in School B, the highly selective school, did not discuss university influence or their concern for students' choice. The school had already decided to keep the depth in specialisation in the two study programmes for matriculation, which might explain why these issues were not raised. However, there were also strong drivers of change in pedagogy and the structure of study among a group of teachers and school leaders. Where divided beliefs existed, these seemed to relate to a lack of belief among some staff that such changes were necessary and the influence of the school's long history and strong culture of being a class-based school.

In the case of the comprehensive schools, there were also divided views about changes in the vocational study programmes, specifically for the certified trades. This related to the view that all the students were learning the same trades, and if schools did not teach the same content, then it would be difficult to evaluate students' learning if they changed school. As a result, both School A and School D collaborated with other schools on the revision of their certified trades.

In contrast to the well-established schools, there was a shared view within School C regarding the study offer and pedagogy. The difference was that School C was new, which meant that changes were not being made in the face of a strongly rooted culture. However, while school leaders were convinced that the school had to specialise in order to survive, and had internal support, they met resistance from people and institutions outside the school. This related to doubts about whether a small school in a remote location could attract enough students if it specialised, and it seems to have become even more of a challenge for the school to prove what it was capable of achieving.

The cross analysis above has revealed how the professional context of the schools interacts with various other contextual dimensions. The way in which participants' views on the schools' policies on curriculum change is influenced by culture, type of school, students' choice, reputation, the university level and the local community, for example, is different both between and within schools. The issue raised here is how these interactions and the schools' different situations need to be understood when considering why and how schools have responded differently to the policy on increased autonomy over the curriculum.

7.2.2 Financial challenges and barriers

Factors related to school finances were highlighted as the biggest barriers to change by most school leaders. Participants in the three well-established schools reported that no additional finance had followed the policy on greater autonomy, so work on changes, and the changes themselves, had to be mainly financed within existing budgets. Some mentioned that the schools had received grants to pay teachers for the work on implementing the new Guide; however, teachers who had experienced these payments described them as insufficient to cover the workload involved in making real changes in subject content. In addition, these schools were already dealing with deficits as a result of cuts after the financial crisis in 2008. This involved reductions in management costs in School A and School D, limiting their financial scope for change and creating extra work for school leaders and teachers.

Furthermore, the dispute over teachers' wages and terms of service led all three well-established schools to temporarily slow down, or stop, work on changes to their study offers. However, when the teachers' new collective agreement with the government was reached in 2014, the schools were able to start their policy work again. The agreement

brought higher wages for teachers, extended the duration of the school year, and abolished the separation between teaching and testing time, which gave schools more autonomy over the structure and content of education.

Cross analysis also revealed that the financial challenges highlighted by participants varied according to factors in the schools' geographic and demographic contexts. For example, School D, the comprehensive school in the countryside which serves a large region, faced particular challenges which limited its scope to offer students diverse study close to their home. While the provision of different study offers is more difficult for schools in the countryside, especially when the number of students in the region is small, two things seem to have made this even more difficult for School D. The first was the new job evaluation, which was introduced after the collective agreement was reached in 2014. School leaders in School D noted that this narrowed the school's scope to develop its course offer due to changes in criteria relating to the size of student groups and links to teachers' payments. Secondly, the shortening of the study programmes for matriculation also led to fewer students in school, making it more difficult to introduce new courses and ensure both their viability and that of existing courses.

The composition of the student body also seems to influence schools' finances. The allocation model used by the MoE at the time when this research was conducted linked payments to the completion of studies, meaning schools were not paid for students who do not finish the term. This meant that schools which took in students who were more likely to drop out ran a greater financial risk, and, in the case of School A, the large comprehensive school in the capital, this led to an operating deficit. School leaders in both School A and School B noted that the allocation model was therefore more beneficial for schools which aimed to attract stronger students, making it more challenging for comprehensive schools to utilise their autonomy to better meet students' needs than for highly selective schools.

In addition, cross analysis revealed that access to suitable classroom accommodation and equipment is a prerequisite for schools to offer more diverse study. However, the situation of each of the schools in this study was different. Three of the four had recently completed extensions to existing buildings, with School B combining the design of a new extension with work on changes in the study offer and pedagogy. School D, in particular, had been waiting for years for a new building for vocational study, and, when it was finally built, the school was able to create new study programmes and offer more comprehensive study. In the case of both comprehensive schools, participants also stressed that finance for the renewal of machines and equipment is also essential in updating the content of vocational study courses.

In contrast to the other schools, financial challenges were not as prominent in School C, the new small school in the countryside. The school was founded after the establishment of the 2008 Act and after the financial crisis that year, so the provisions of the new

policy were incorporated from the very beginning. The operation of the school had since been adapted according to the number of students in the school. However, due to the small population in the immediate vicinity, it remained a challenge to maintain diversity in the study offer for local students. The school's response was to focus on distance learning and cooperation with other schools in order to enhance this diversity.

The cross analysis above demonstrates that the actual scope of school autonomy over the curriculum must be examined in relation to the financial resources available to schools, and whether these changed with the advent of the new policy. The document analysis conducted for this study, which highlighted various financial challenges, supports these findings. The issue raised here is the interplay between the different geographic and demographic contexts of the schools and the financial framework and how this affected their scope and responses to the policy on curriculum autonomy.

7.2.3 Disparity between policy intentions and the reality of students' choice

Cross analysis of students' and parents' views indicates a disparity between the aims of the policy on school autonomy to better meet students' diverse aims and needs and the reality of students' choice of school and study.

Parents and students in all schools spoke about students' uncertainty of choice when starting upper secondary school, which suggests that it can be daunting for students to choose from a variety of options. Therefore, guidance from schools and counselling services are considered of great importance for students. In this respect, the dominance of academic study at elementary level is believed to lead students to opt for similar study at upper secondary level instead of trying vocational study, for example, even if they thought the latter would suit them better. However, there were also students across the schools who reported choosing study programmes based on their strengths and needs. For example, students in School B and School D described comparing their relative strengths in social and natural science before deciding which programme to choose, and, in the case of School C, there were students who had moved to the school because they thought the teaching methods and arrangement of study suited their needs. In addition, there were also students in the three well-established schools who reported choosing academic study programmes rather than vocational study because of the access to university they would provide.

Cross analysis also revealed difference between students in the capital and those in the countryside in terms of their experience of exercising their choice. Prominent among students and parents from School A and School B in the capital was the influence of each school's reputation on students' choice of study and school. Schools' reputations seem to be determined mainly by the extra-curricular activities available and whether the academic study programmes are thought to be demanding. In both schools, it was evident that the popularity and reputation of the highly selective schools have led to

competition between stronger students for admission, meaning some students find their choice of schools is limited by their final grades from elementary school. Some parents in School A thought that this had led to academic segregation, with non-selective schools, like School A, now lower in the hierarchy.

By contrast, it was clear that participants in the countryside perceive students' choice in the context of geographic access and equal opportunities to study. One of the main concerns among parents was that 16-year-old students are considered too young to go away from home, which limits their access to schools beyond their locality. In addition, issues relating to travel distances and weather conditions, especially in remote areas, and higher costs of living if students move away are also seen as limiting students' overall choice of school and study. As a result, in School D, for example, the availability of a dormitory for students whose homes were far from the school was an attraction. It was evident that parents in School D wanted their children to have a greater choice between schools and options beyond simply staying with the same student group as in elementary school, and, despite the diverse study offer in the school, there was a feeling that students' choice of certified trades was limited when compared with the capital area.

The above analysis indicates that many students are uncertain about their choices when they start upper secondary school. It also identifies the factors at play in addition to their own study interests, including prior experience at elementary level, school reputation, access to university, grades from elementary school, and proximity to their homes. Two issues are raised here. Firstly, to what extent these factors might lead to a more homogeneous choice of study and, as such, impact the schools' scope and responses to the policy on curriculum autonomy. Secondly, the issue of accessibility and equal opportunities to study, especially in more rural areas, and to what extent policy on school autonomy can actually overcome these challenges, despite the stated policy aims.

7.3 Policy consequences – issues and tensions in working contexts

The third overarching theme which emerged from analysis of the four cases was policy consequences – issues and tensions in working contexts. Two subthemes emerged within this key theme. These are 'school leadership and managing change' and 'teachers' sense of responsibility and job security'. Findings from cross analysis of this theme are intended to contribute to the answer to the third research question: *What issues and tensions did school leaders and teachers experience in relation to the policy enactment?*

7.3.1 School leadership and managing change

Cross analysis revealed similarities in how the head teachers in the four schools perceived the policy on school autonomy as increasing their educational leadership and responsibility, in both positive and negative ways. For example, the head teacher in School C described how it prompted them to think about what kind of education would be best for their students. However, the increased role of school leaders as managers of change increased their workload, and some reported experiencing additional stress because of the way work on changes to the curriculum impacted morale in their schools. Leaders in all three well-established schools reported that managing change in the study offer was particularly challenging because of resistance from teachers who wanted to defend their subjects and, ultimately, their jobs. However, leaders in School C experienced no resistance from teachers relating to job-insecurity or changes to existing practices, again suggesting that it was easier for them to manage change because they were a new school without long-established cultures and practices.

The issue of schools' responsibility was prominent in the interviews, with concerns expressed about the implications of the policy for students and their progress at university. It will take time to see the impact of curriculum changes and the shortening of the study programmes for matriculation, and leaders in School B and School D highlighted the fact that more research is needed. Prominent also was how leaders from all schools spoke of the need for more professional discussion on the policy. This related both to the need for more support and discussion on professional matters with the MoE and discussion on a broader level between schools and other school levels. Several leaders in the three well-established schools also expressed the view that greater school autonomy increases the need for control and feedback on what is done in schools. Some leaders in School A, for example, spoke about the need to strengthen external evaluation, and, in School B, the head teacher highlighted the need for more support with quality management. However, most school leaders interviewed were not supportive of standardised tests. These were believed to exert too much influence over teaching and therefore to be incompatible with the policy on school autonomy. By contrast, leaders in School C did not express a desire for more control in parallel to increased responsibility, or greater support with quality management; however, as the head teacher noted, one of their school leaders has a background in the field of internal evaluation, which greatly enhanced their ability to develop and conduct internal evaluations.

The cross analysis above indicates that the policy on school autonomy over curriculum development has impacted school leaders' working contexts, particularly those of head teachers, in two significant ways. Firstly, their responsibility for policy making on study offers and their role in managing change has increased. This finding is supported by document analysis for all cases, which reveals examples of policy making in the schools

and various challenges due to managing change and resources. These include the issues related to divided professional beliefs and financial challenges identified in the previous section (See 7.2). The additional responsibility has inevitably imposed extra workloads on school leaders, although findings suggest that this varies according to how extensive the work on policy and changes is at any given time. In response to these new demands, school leaders' need for support, professional discussion, and feedback on the effects of the changes has also increased.

7.3.2 Teachers' sense of responsibility and job security

The findings indicate that the policy on school autonomy has raised various issues related to how teachers experience their responsibility for students' choice and study. As the section on divided professional beliefs has shown, teachers generally perceive their responsibility as ensuring their teaching meets students' different needs and prepares them for university or for the journeyman's examination. In addition, particularly, in the comprehensive schools, teachers felt responsible for ensuring that students who move between schools can have their study evaluated properly, something which has become more challenging with the new policy.

Cross analysis revealed that teachers from all four schools experienced increased responsibility for the content of their teaching subjects; this was manifested in various ways, including through teachers who spoke of their need for greater professional discussion and cooperation between teachers, both within and across school. Teachers in subjects without a professional manager, as was the case with two teachers in the comprehensive schools, also noted the need for professional management to lead their cooperation and work on curriculum changes. Teachers also expressed concerns over the shortage of teaching material and its quality, particularly in the well-established schools. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, teaching materials in some subjects were already outdated; secondly, there were fears that increased diversity between schools in terms of course content would make it more difficult for publishers to produce new teaching material because of the small market in the country; and, thirdly, teachers recognised that they have different levels of skills and experience in compiling or writing teaching materials, and, together with time constraints and the limited funding provided, this was likely to reduce the quality of material available to them.

Teachers' views on how the policy on school autonomy motivated them in their work were also mixed. Teachers in School D and School C, for example, spoke of the advantage of being able to teach topics which interested them and to bring in their own ideas. However, some teachers in the comprehensive schools raised the issue of teachers' insecurity regarding utilising their autonomy to make changes in their teaching subjects. This was related to the desire they expressed for more discussion and cooperation between teachers, and, as a teacher in School A reported, the belief that one teacher alone cannot decide on the whole subject in one school without consulting with teachers in other schools. There was also the view put forward by

teachers in School D that teachers themselves are different, and some, for example younger teachers, might be more willing to make changes than others. Teachers in School A and School B also spoke about the extra workload involved in changing the content of subjects and the lack of adequate payment for the work, noting that this can reduce teachers' interest in making such changes and lead them to feel that their work is not valued.

It was clear that the policy on school autonomy also affected teachers' job security in all schools; this was evident in the interviews with head teachers who reported that teachers defending their jobs was the greatest challenge in managing change. In schools where changes were made in the composition of the course offer or in free selection, such as in School B and School D, teachers reported less flexibility to teach their speciality and subjects of interests. This was compounded by the shortening of the study time for matriculation, which reduced student numbers, and teachers in School D described competing with each other to attract enough students for their free selection courses to run. By contrast, teachers in the new school felt their job security had increased due to larger numbers of distance-learning students and more free selection.

Most teachers in the four schools opposed standardised tests because they felt they went against the policy on curriculum autonomy because of their controlling effects. However, while there are no standardised academic tests in upper secondary schools in Iceland, vocational students still take the journeyman's examination for certified trades. In both comprehensive schools, vocational teachers raised the issue of the influence of this examination on what is taught in schools, and the limits this placed on their autonomy. However, there was also a sense that some standardisation in the training for certified trades across schools was required.

The above cross analysis indicates that teachers felt an increased responsibility for the content of their subjects and for students' study. This is reflected in various factors, including their sense of responsibility for meeting students' different needs and preparing them for university or the journeyman's examinations. There is also concern that greater diversity between schools will make it more difficult to publish new teaching materials and for students to have their study evaluated if they change school. Three issues are raised by these findings. Firstly, that the policy on school autonomy has created various tensions and increased teachers' workload related to their sense of greater responsibility. Secondly, teachers' need for more cooperation and professional discussion. Thirdly, the way that the policy impacts teachers' job security if it is used to make changes in course offers, especially if teachers need to compete for students to ensure their courses are viable.

7.4 Accomplished for students – different effects in different contexts

The fourth overarching theme which emerged from analysis of the four cases relates to what the policy on school autonomy is considered to have accomplished for students

and reveals different effects in different contexts. Three subthemes emerged within this theme: 'diversity, flexibility, and students' responsibility', 'equal access and opportunities' and 'the consequences of shortening the study time for matriculation'. Findings from cross analysis of this theme are intended to contribute to the answer to the fourth research question: *What did school stakeholders believe the policy on school autonomy was achieving for students?*

7.4.1 Diversity, flexibility and students' responsibility

Cross analysis revealed an increase in the diversity and flexibility of students' study in all schools. This was manifested in a variety of ways, notably in the offer of new or revised study programmes, and all four schools utilised the policy on school autonomy in this way. For example, in School A, two new specialised academic study programmes were introduced, along with an open study programme and an upper secondary programme. In School D, a more comprehensive certified trades offer was developed, with two new vocational study programmes in addition to an open study programme and an upper secondary programme. Even School C, the new school, introduced new programmes, including an open study programme, an upper secondary programme, and arts, sports, and outdoor track study programmes. In School B, the highly selective school, various changes were made to the existing study programmes for matriculation. Students across the schools reported being happy with the choice of study programmes, especially the many vocational study programmes offered, and none of them identified a need for more diverse study programmes in their interviews. However, as discussed below, concerns were expressed about equal access and opportunities.

Students also reported greater choice and flexibility of study within their study programmes. This was most prominent in relation to the open study programmes for matriculation which were introduced in School A, School C and School D, and in the structural changes in the study programmes in School B. Within the open study programmes, students were given a greater choice of specialisation and free selection, which meant increased options to choose study suited to their different aims and needs. As a result, these programmes were believed to make it easier for more students to complete matriculation. In School B, the highly selective school, students' choice was increased within the study programmes for matriculation and the flexibility around the study time increased as well. In School C, students' choice was enhanced both by new courses within the school and by the range of cooperation with other schools through distance learning. This enabled students on the open study programme, for example, to choose specialist courses provided elsewhere.

Another theme which emerged related to the way students' responsibility for the composition of their study had increased with the introduction of greater free selection within the study programmes. Concerns were expressed by some teachers in School A, School C and School D that students might not choose the best options to prepare for

university, and a teacher in School C noted that too much free selection can make things more complicated for students who are uncertain about their choices. The focus in School D had originally been to have considerable free selection in the study programmes for matriculation; however, some students and parents thought this might lead students to opt for easier courses than they would otherwise have done. These concerns were not found among teachers in School B, the highly selective school, where a collective decision was made to keep the depth in subjects in the study programmes.

The introduction of upper secondary programmes in School A, School C and School D was also highlighted by participants as a way to meet students' different aims and needs. This programme is designed for students who need more preparation before starting academic study programmes for matriculation or vocational programmes. However, while these programmes were perceived as supporting students and, as a school leader in School D pointed out, reducing drop-out rates, a participant in School A noted that graduation from the upper secondary programme does not confer any rights on students, other than to progress to a higher-level programme. In School B, in contrast to the other schools, no upper secondary programme was provided; the school had planned to offer one, but it did not get the finance needed for its operation.

Despite these changes to study programmes, cross analysis revealed some doubts concerning whether the policy had led to real change in the content of education. Most participants in the three well-established schools reported little or no change in the content of specific subjects and little overall change in the range of courses on offer. Some changes were reported, but these varied considerably between subjects, with significant changes in some and none or very few in others. For example, in School B, several new courses were introduced, but others were closed, and, while participants in School A reported a few new courses, the new study programmes were mainly made up of existing courses. In School C, the new school, the situation was somewhat different as the course descriptions met the new criteria from the beginning, while participants in School C and School D noted that teachers had effectively introduced new courses due to the increased options for free selection.

One pattern which emerged from cross analysis was the way the changes in study assessment and teaching methods in the schools helped students feel that their study was suited to their different needs. The three well-established schools were moving away from final tests to more diverse uses of formative assessment, and, School C, the new school, had never used them. In School B, this move away from final testing was part of the school's wider policy on changes in pedagogy; however, in School A and School D, the process was more gradual, and teachers had the freedom to decide which assessment methods to use in their subjects. Students and parents in School A, School B and School C noted that they felt formative assessment was better for students' wellbeing as final tests can cause anxiety and stress. In School B, the highly selective

school, students and parents also reported finding the new overall teaching and assessment arrangements better suited to students' needs. There were also students in School C, the new school, who pointed out that the greater diversity in teaching methods and assignments helped to reduce drop-outs. The issue of teaching methods and study assessment was not raised to the same extent by students in School D, possibly because formative assessment was already used in many courses. However, parents in School D were divided about this, with those who were supportive of both formative assessments and final tests arguing that students needed to be prepared for formal testing at university level.

One negative aspect of diversity which emerged from cross analysis was a decline in the transparency of students' study. There were participants in each school who consider that the greater diversity in courses and course content between schools has made it more complicated for students to move between schools and have all their study evaluated. Some students reported that this was especially challenging if students moved from a comprehensive school, with a unit-based system, to a highly selective school with a class-based system; however, others felt that this was equally difficult when moving between comprehensive schools. By contrast, others thought that the increased flexibility in study programmes made it easier for students to have their study evaluated if they moved schools. For example, the head teacher in School B, the highly selective school, thought the new system had made it easier for students to move there from other schools, and participants in School C also pointed out that their open study programme had made it easier for students from other schools to have their study evaluated, even specialist study.

The above findings indicate that the policy on school autonomy has led to students experiencing a more diverse choice of study programmes and greater flexibility within those programmes. However, this has increased students' responsibility for ensuring their choice of study is appropriate. Findings also suggest that students perceive the changes made in teaching and assessment methods as leading to study which is better suited to their different needs. There are some concerns that the increased diversity in course offers has made it more difficult for students to have their study evaluated effectively if they change schools; however, the increase in open study programmes in some schools has made it easier for them to accommodate students who started their studies elsewhere.

7.4.2 Equal access and opportunities

Cross analysis indicates that the policy on school autonomy has increased equity in education to some extent. Example of this are the open study programmes and the upper secondary programmes in School A, School C, and School D, and the changes in the study programmes in School B, all of which are considered to better meet students' different aims and needs. However, findings reveal that some students

experience greater educational opportunities than others, suggesting there may also be a gap between policy aims and reality in this area. This disparity was particularly prominent in the schools in the capital, with school leaders in School A, the comprehensive school, and School B, the highly selective school, experiencing the overall changes in very different ways due to the differences in their respective student bodies. While, school leaders in School B saw the changes as radical and in line with the needs of their students, those in School A perceived them as insignificant and failing to meet the needs of all their students, especially those with difficulties in learning or unsupportive home backgrounds. In addition, cross analysis of students' and parents' views in both schools revealed common concerns about the lack of equal access to all schools and how this limits students' opportunities to choose. This related primarily to the way grades from elementary school determine students access to the highly selective schools, and this has not changed with the coming of the policy on autonomy.

In the schools in the countryside, by contrast, the most prominent factors affecting equity related to geographic and economic barriers. Distances, travel and weather conditions, and the cost of studying away from home were widely agreed to limit students' real choice of school and study, especially in the most rural areas. However, a difference emerged between School C, the new school, and School D, the comprehensive school located close to the capital area, in students' and parents' perceptions of what the policy had achieved in this regard. This seemed to relate to specific circumstances in the schools' local contexts. Although School C was small school, its opening in a more remote area of the country had made it possible for more students to study at home. The local community welcomed the school, and more students in the area progressed to secondary education than before. Most participants, therefore, considered that the school had increased students' opportunities, despite its small size. In School D, students' opportunity to study at home had also increased because of the new vocational offers for certified trades and the new academic study programmes. However, students and parents felt their real choices were still limited by geographic barriers, particularly the distances between School D and the homes of students living in the rural areas. In addition, although the school was relatively close to the capital area, it was not considered viable for younger students to drive over the mountain road daily or to move away from home to study there, thus denying them access to a greater range of schools and a more varied choice of certified trades.

The above themes raise two issues. Firstly, the effect of the policy is perceived differently in each school and must be understood in relation to the schools' individual contexts. For example, in School A, the open study programme and the upper secondary programmes were considered to meet a greater range of student needs; however, at the same time, some school leaders experienced these changes as insignificant and offering little to meet the needs of students with the weakest backgrounds. In School C, by contrast, the creation of the new school in a more remote

area was seen as enhancing students' options, even though the school was small, because it meant students could study at home. The second issue raised is how the policy on school autonomy has not been able to overcome some significant barriers to students' equal access and opportunities for study. In the case of students in the capital area, this relates to the impact of previous grades on their choice of schools, and, in the case of students in the countryside, this relates primarily to geographical barriers.

7.4.3 Consequences of shortening study time for matriculation

The consequences of shortening the academic study programmes for matriculation from four years to three were prominent in the interviews with students from the three well-established schools. In School A, students experienced this as the main change in the study offer, and, in School B, students felt the changes in the school were directly linked to the shortening of the study time. All the students interviewed in the well-established schools felt that their study had been compressed, rather than shortened, leading to an increased workload and less time for extra-curricular activities. Students in School A felt the core subjects had been the most compressed, but students from all three schools said they felt their scope for free selection had been reduced.

Students in School A and School D highlighted the fact that the flexibility of the comprehensive schools allowed students to study at their own pace, and some in School A felt this meant students in general were not particularly concerned about finishing their study in three years. By contrast, in School D, students felt that three years had now become the norm, and this had increased stress and anxiety among students. However, the students interviewed in School B did not report increased stress, even though they thought some study had been compressed. This seems to relate to the fact that they find the new arrangement of teaching is still manageable for them. However, the careers adviser interviewed in School B felt that anxiety levels among students were similar to other schools and that the shortening of study programmes had added to it because of the increased workload. The issue was not raised by interviewees in School C, as its study programmes for matriculation were organised over three years from the start.

The findings above indicate that the consequences of shortening the study time for matriculation have increased students' workloads, reduced their scope for free selection, and given them less time for extra-curricular activities. This appears to be at odds with the stated aims of the policy on school autonomy to increase diversity and choice to better meet students' different aims and needs.

8 Discussion

This multiple case study of four upper secondary schools was intended to increase understanding of how policy on school autonomy over curriculum has been perceived by a range of school stakeholders and what they believe it has achieved so far. In the preceding chapters, findings from both the individual case studies and the cross-case analysis have been presented. In this chapter, the main themes and issues which emerged from these findings are discussed in relation to the conceptual framework and the literature review in order to answer the four research questions developed for this study. The chapter is therefore divided into four sections, each of which addresses one of the research questions.

8.1 How did school leaders and teachers interpret the meaning of school autonomy as the policy was enacted within schools?

The findings revealed that school leaders and teachers from the four schools experienced certain contradictions in the policy on school autonomy over curriculum development and mixed messages. While the policy was generally interpreted as an open opportunity for schools to make changes to their study offer, many participants experienced constraints on their ability to exercise their autonomy, including a complicated qualification framework, reduced transparency of study, additional bureaucracy in relation to the National Curriculum Guide (2011), and increased administration. Their capacity to enact change was also limited by the requirement to shorten the study time for matriculation. Although the main aim of the policy on school autonomy was to enable schools to better meet students' diverse needs, the fall in student numbers due to the shorter study time made this more difficult to achieve in practice. These findings suggest a disparity between participants' interpretations of policy documents and how they experienced school autonomy in reality, with participants finding significant shortfalls between their expectations of the policy and what they were able to achieve in practice.

In seeking to understand this disparity, it is helpful to recall Simkins (1997), who pointed out that, when researching policy on school autonomy, one needs to consider whether there has also been an increase in "external control and constraints" (Simkins, 1997, p. 22). In this respect, the two dimensional model of criteria power and operational power provided by Winstanley et al. (1995) is informative, with findings indicating that, while the criteria power of schools has increased due to greater autonomy over curriculum development, their operational power is seen as less than

expected due to increases in bureaucracy, workload, and administration. The decision to shorten the study time for matriculation has also been perceived as constraining the schools' operations.

Despite the above general conclusions, differences between schools were found in the ways in which school leaders and teachers perceived the policy enactment. The main difference related to the schools' situated context (Ball et al., 2012) and was most visible between School C, the new school, and the three well-established schools. Some teachers in School C thought that it had been easier for them to implement the provisions of the National Curriculum Guide because the school was new and had offered three-year study programmes for matriculation from the very beginning. Therefore, while teachers and leaders in other schools had to work out how to fit existing content into the new framework, School C did not experience this constraint.

The findings from this study are consistent with research on school autonomy in other countries which has revealed a mismatch between how school stakeholders have interpreted the scope of their autonomy from policy documents and how the policy has then been experienced in practice (Erss et al., 2016; Lundström, 2015; Gobby, 2013; Higham & Earley, 2013; Keddie et al., 2011; Finnigan, 2007; Ascher & Greenberg, 2002). Various explanations have been provided for this mismatch, notably how school performance accountability measures, such as high-stakes tests, have been experienced as limiting autonomy over curriculum development (Hooge et al., 2012). However, policy reforms on school autonomy differ between countries, and this explanation cannot be applied to the Icelandic context as there are no high-stakes tests at upper secondary school level, or any other standardised measures of students' performance, except for the journeyman's examination for the certified trades. Of more relevance are studies which have drawn attention to how increases in the "administrative burden", in parallel with a shortage of support and finance (Gobby, 2013, p. 31) and greater centralised educational bureaucracy (Ascher & Greenberg, 2002), have been perceived as constraining expected autonomy. These studies support the findings of this research, which show that increased bureaucracy and heavy administration have been perceived as limiting schools' capacity to achieve the autonomy as understood from policy. Cross analysis of the case studies indicates that this was more acute in the two comprehensive schools than in Schools B and C. This is in line with findings from Stefánsdóttir's (2018) research on two comprehensive schools in Iceland, which found that school leaders experienced greater difficulty in creating new vocational study programmes than new academic study programmes, due to the complex approval process.

Furthermore, as Erss et al. (2016) explain, no policy exists in isolation, and one policy initiative can impact how another reform is perceived. Their research, conducted in the German context, found that teachers there did not experience the intended increase in autonomy due to the effects of earlier reforms, which reduced the study period by one

year without "reducing curriculum content" (Erss et al., 2016, p. 603). The findings of this study regarding the impact of shortening the study period for matriculation in Iceland echo those of Erss et al. (2016) and underline the importance of examining individual policies in relation to other policies and initiatives which are in circulation, given that, as Ball (1997) explains, "the enactment of one may inhibit or contradict or influence the possibility of the enactment of others" (p. 265).

Overall, and despite the above restraints, the findings suggest that the policy examined in this study has led to greater autonomy for head teachers and teachers. On one hand, the policy is seen as a transfer of authority and final decision making on study offers from the MoE to head teachers. This kind of delegation has, in the literature, been viewed as a form of administrative decentralisation (Bray, 2013; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Fiske, 1996; Ferris, 1992). On the other hand, the policy is also considered to have increased teachers' autonomy over the content of their teaching subjects due to the less prescriptive National Curriculum Guide in 2011, a form of autonomy referred to as delegation of professional control (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). However, many teachers interviewed in this study felt that little had actually changed in respect of their individual autonomy. This seems to relate to the fact that they felt they already had considerable autonomy over their teaching, were trusted by their head teachers, and experienced little interference in their work. This is in line with Salokangas et al., (2020) who understand teachers' autonomy as a multidimensional concept, of which a key aspect is how teachers perceive their curriculum autonomy in relation to management within the school.

Despite some difference between schools, findings in general indicated little formal participation of school board members, parents and students in policy making on study offers. As such the findings suggest that the motive behind the policy on school autonomy has been less a form of 'community control' (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998), in which parents and the local community are given increased decision-making authority, but rather a blend of administrative and professional control.

When this study was conducted, upper secondary schools were in the early stages of utilising the policy on school autonomy to enact change, and, at the same time, they were obliged to implement various provisions introduced in the National Curriculum Guide (2011) and to shorten the study time for matriculation. As this research has demonstrated, these competing demands have led to a gap between school leaders' and teachers' understanding of school autonomy as presented in the policy documents and as it was actually enacted within schools. However, when interpreting the findings from this study, it is important to remember that stakeholders' perceptions can change, and experience over time might lead to further adaptation and changes, both in policy and in practice.

8.2 How did different contextual factors affect schools' ability to respond to the policy on increased school autonomy?

The main findings from this study show that each school's scope to respond to the policy on school autonomy was influenced by the complex interplay between various factors within their specific contexts. Three key subthemes emerged from the data analysis: divided professional beliefs, financial challenges and barriers, and the disparity between policy intentions and the reality of students' choice.

8.2.1 Divided professional beliefs

The findings show that the professional context (Ball et al., 2012) of each school is a key factor when it comes to explaining how the schools have responded to the policy on school autonomy. This relates to the impact school leaders and teachers have on policy making in their schools regarding changes in the study offer. Findings also show how the professional beliefs in the schools interacted with other contextual dimensions in various ways, which then influenced the schools' policies on curriculum change. Prominent factors in this respect were school culture, university-level influence, and school reputation. The way in which participants' views were influenced by these factors differed between schools, and they worked both for and against ideas about changing the curriculum. These findings are in line with the concept of policy enactment as presented by Ball et al. (2012), who explain that "most schools have distinct sets of professional cultures, outlooks and attitudes that have evolved over time and that inflect policy responses in particular ways." (p. 27). In addition, the professional context within each school is "not necessarily coherent nor do they go uncontested" (p. 27).

School Cultures

One of the main differences found between schools was how rooted cultures and divided professional beliefs about curriculum changes in the three well-established schools made it more difficult for them to enact change compared to School C, the new school. This is in line with findings from Ragnarsdóttir's (2018a) study, also in the Icelandic context, which found that "it proved to be more difficult to implement changes in the schools which had a long history than in newer schools" (p. 14), although there were some exceptions. The present study also found an exception among the well-established schools in the case of School B, the highly selective school, which managed to make radical changes despite divided views and resistance within the school. Several participants from School B ascribed this to the strong vision of the school leaders and the acceptance by a core group of teachers that changes were needed. This is consistent with Priestley et al. (2014), who concluded that differences in the way schools manage to innovate and change existing culture can be explained by the existence of a clear vision and the extent to which teachers understand what the new ideas will mean for the study offer in their school. However, although there was a

support for policy change internally, School C also had to prove the value of the new ways to the local community, a context in which a strong vision and belief in the need for change was also important. In this respect, School C also raises the issue of the impact of prevailing ideas and traditions of schooling within the external environment.

University-level Influences

The findings from this study are also consistent with other research in the Icelandic context, notably Ragnarsdóttir & Jónasson (2020) and Ragnarsdóttir (2018b), which examined the way the university level impacted changes at upper secondary level. In this respect, Ragnarsdóttir and Jónasson (2020) draw attention to the influence of the entrance criteria for different degree programmes, as these "indicate what is important to study in upper secondary school in order to do well when attending university" (p. 202). This raises questions about the extent to which the university's influence might work in a similar way to accountability mechanisms, which are believed to lead to a narrower curriculum. The findings from this study indicate that schools responded to this influence in different ways, with factors in each schools' situated context (Ball et al., 2012), including the student population and the current study offer, accounting for these differences. For example, in School D, influence from the University of Iceland led to the school withdrawing its focus on free selection in the study programmes, even though this had enhanced students' choice. This recalls Keddie's (2016, 2014) studies, which showed how schools' scope to use their autonomy can be constrained by external measures, such as standardised tests, which drive them to focus on specific subjects within their curricula. However, in contrast to the other schools, participants in School B, the highly selective school, did not highlight the university influence as a particular pressure. This seems to relate to the fact that, despite making various changes, the school decided to keep its focus on depth in the subjects on its study programmes for matriculation, as this was believed to be good preparation for university.

School Reputation

The focus on what was believed to be good preparation for university created particular issues for School A, raising concerns about the school's reputation and an increase in stratification between schools. It was clear that staff in School A were concerned that the school could lose stronger students to the highly selective schools, depending on the way it chose to respond to the new policy. This is consistent with Holloway and Keddie (2020), who found a connection between school leaders' concerns about competition between schools in relation to school autonomy and increased stratification in the school system. However, while the findings of the present study showed that competition between schools influenced their responses to curriculum autonomy, it also revealed that some schools collaborated, both locally and nationally, in order to improve their study offer. Both the participating comprehensive schools collaborated with other schools on the revision of their programmes for the certified trades, based

on the belief that these needed to be the same across schools, and schools also collaborated with others in different parts of the country to expand their distance-learning offer. This is consistent with Urbanovič et al. (2019), who found that schools were more likely to collaborate with schools located at a distance and those which are similar to them, unless they were competing for students.

8.2.2 Financial challenges and barriers

Most of the school leaders who participated in this study saw factors related to school finances as the biggest barriers to utilising the policy on school autonomy. The three well-established schools were still dealing with the effects of the deficits and cuts which followed the 2008 financial crisis, and this limited their scope to make changes. Leaders from these schools reported that no additional finance had been provided to support policy implementation, so any additional costs had to be met within existing budgets. Schools still got grants to pay teachers for implementing the National Curriculum Guide (2011), but these were perceived as insufficient given the increased workload involved. Indeed, the dispute over teachers' wages and terms and conditions delayed the well-established schools' work on potential changes, and they were only able to begin to exercise the greater flexibility offered by the 2008 Act once the new collective agreement with the Teachers' Union was introduced in 2014.

Overall, two main differences between the schools emerged in respect of their finances, both of which related to contextual factors. Firstly, financial challenges were not highlighted by participants in School C to the same extent as in the other schools. School C was new, and had, from its foundation, operated within the framework of the new policy and managed to stay within its financial budget. Secondly, the interplay between schools' finances and their demographic and geographical contexts had different impacts on their ability to enact their autonomy over the curriculum. Despite some similarities in how the three well-established schools, in particular, perceived their financial scope to utilise policy on school autonomy, the findings suggest that the interplay between their material contexts (Ball et al., 2012) and other contextual dimensions affected their ability to respond in different ways. For example, the MoE's allocation model seems to be more beneficial for schools who target stronger students, and schools in sparsely populated regions found it difficult to enrol enough students to be able to offer them diverse study close to their home. The latter relates to economies of scale (Keddie et al., 2020), which make it is more difficult for small schools to offer diverse study; however, findings from the present study suggest that, in the case of small schools in more remote area, distance learning can be used to overcome such challenges.

The findings of this study are consistent with other research which shows how material contexts (Ball et al., 2012), such as finance, impacts the capacity and scope of schools to utilise curriculum autonomy for change. In an example from England, the extra

funding which followed policy on academisation was believed to be "significant in supporting the school to pursue programmes that promoted its ethos" (Keddie, 2014, p. 512). By contrast, in an example from Western Australia, a shortage of finance was perceived as constraining "capacity to innovate and problem solve" (Gobby, 2013, p. 19). Findings from this study also draw attention to how schools' ability to offer more diverse study depends on suitable classroom accommodation being available. For example, in the case of School D, the comprehensive school in the countryside, its ability to offer more comprehensive and diverse vocational study depended on additional teaching spaces being created. The findings of this study therefore raise the issue of how actual scope for school autonomy over curriculum must be examined with respect to how it interacts with other resources and whether there have been commensurate changes in them as well.

However, as Bullock and Thomas (2002) have pointed out, the interaction between power over different types of resources is complex, and this can make it difficult to estimate the "sum of delegated power" (p. 8). An example of such a complex interaction within this study is that between the policy on school autonomy, the teachers' collective agreement in 2014, and the new job evaluations which followed. On one hand, the abolition of the separation between teaching time and test time and the increase in the length of the schools' operation time provided more flexibility for schools to decide how to structure teaching and assessment methods, thereby increasing their operational power. However, the job evaluation was considered to have decreased school leaders' operational power because, as a school leader in School D pointed out, it resulted in a narrower scope for course offers. The collective agreement in place at the time the policy was introduced also created additional barriers for schools, leading three of them to delay their policy work until the new agreement was in place. This study, therefore, raises the issue of the disparity between the period when schools are supposed to enact policy, as established by law, and their ability to do so, due to constraints from other factors in their working environment which have not yet been adapted to meet the policy needs.

As these findings indicate, the way financial resources are distributed to schools and their different situated contexts (Ball et al., 2012) impact their ability to enact the policy on school autonomy over the curriculum. This signals the need to find a mechanism for a "fairer distribution of resources", which acknowledges that "funding needs will differ according to different local contexts" (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006, p. 315-316).

8.2.3 Disparity between policy and the reality of students' choice

One of the prerequisites for the four schools to utilise the policy on school autonomy to offer more diverse study was that students would be willing and able to choose more diverse study to meet their different aims and needs. Students' choice is, therefore, a major factor when considering how elements in the schools' context have impacted

their ability to utilise the policy to make changes. The findings from this study revealed a certain disparity between the stated policy aims and students' choice in practice. This related to several factors which seem to lead students to make more homogeneous choices of study, not least the preference for academic rather than vocational programmes, and, the way this affected the schools' scope to respond. Findings also revealed a difference between how students in the capital and those in the countryside experienced their access to schools and study, which draws attention to whether upper secondary schools can, in reality, meet students' needs by providing equal opportunities for study.

Findings from this study are consistent with other research which shows how students' choice is influenced by factors beyond their academic interests (Cuff, 2017; Rodeiro, 2007); for example, they also consider how useful programmes are for their future and their own abilities. However, as this study has found, when students are uncertain, they tend to choose what they already know rather than trying something new. This was reflected in the way the dominance of academic study at elementary level influenced students' choice of similar study at upper secondary level, instead of trying vocational study, for example. This is consistent with Svavarsdóttir (2010), also in the Icelandic context, who found that students who were uncertain about their choices were more likely to apply for academic study programmes. This, in turn, is likely to influence upper secondary schools' study offers, as noted by Þorkelsson (2011). The findings also suggest that the preference for academic rather than vocational study is influenced by the fact that the former is considered to provide better access to university. This is consistent with research which indicates that academic study is given higher status in the Icelandic system (Eiríksdóttir et al., 2018; Nylund et al., 2018; Sych, 2016), and this discourages students from selecting more diverse study options at upper secondary level.

A key factor here relates to the importance of providing sufficient information to students on their options, both in terms of the study offers available and the schools themselves. Findings here, for example, revealed that students want information about their options earlier and would appreciate more chances to participate in 'taster' sessions in the final year of elementary school. This is in line with Foskett et al. (2008), who found that students lacked opportunities to gain "tangible experience of the diversity" (p. 16) ahead. In addition to information on study offers, information about schools' performance has also been seen as a prerequisite for the effective functioning of a market mechanism composed of students' choice and school autonomy (Musset, 2012). In Iceland, there are few official measures, such as standardised tests, to compare upper secondary school performance; however information about schools and their study offers can be accessed on their own websites or via websites which provide

study and career support[30] with links to the schools. Findings from this study are consistent with the literature, notably Waslander et al. (2010) and Teelken et al. (2005), which show that school reputation can serve as a key source in determining parents' and students' choice. However, it was noticeable that its impact appeared to be more prominent among participants from the schools in the capital rather than those in the countryside and related mainly to the quality of extra-curricular activities and whether the academic study was thought to be sufficiently demanding. Competition between stronger students to get into the highly selective schools in the capital was also prominent as a theme, and this was of particular concern to both staff and parents in School B. This raises the issue of whether the popularity of the highly selective schools promotes homogeneity in their study offers rather than encouraging diversity. Glatter et al. (1997), for example, concluded that popular schools have little motive to change things significantly, but instead seek to enhance "their existing characteristics" (p. 21).

The findings from this study also raise the issue of a disparity between policy aims to increase students' choice and students' actual ability to exercise their choice due to limited access. This was particularly prominent in the capital, where competition to enter the highly selective schools limits choice for students with lower grades from elementary school. This is consistent with studies such as Musset (2012), Þorkelsson (2011), and Teelken et al. (2005), which drew attention to the ways in which admissions criteria based on academic achievement limit students' choice. Students' freedom of choice of school and study was also found to be affected by their geographical location, with students in the countryside facing more limited choice of study, or longer travel distances, adverse weather conditions, and higher costs of living if they want or need to study away from home. While other studies have identified the link between geographical location and student choice, notably Prieto et al. (2019), Müller et al. (2012), M. Þorkelsson (2011), C. Bell (2009), and C. Taylor (2002), this study builds on Þorkelsson (2011) in highlighting the difference between students' options in the countryside, compared to those in the capital area, and also within the different regions in the countryside.

To better understand the relationship between barriers to students' choice and how this then influences schools' ability to respond to curriculum autonomy, it is helpful to return to Winstanley et al.'s (1995) conception of criteria power and operational power. Within this context, students hold power over schools through their choice and this impacts the schools' operational power. However, as Hamilton and Guin (2005) have noted, students' choice is "constrained by the options available to them" (p. 53); this affects "the interplay between demand and supply" (p. 53) in terms of schools'

[30] See, for example, næstaskref.is (https://naestaskref.is/), namogstorf.is (https://namogstorf.is/) and attavitinn.is (https://attavitinn.is/) (All in Icelandic).

competition for students, and the findings of this study indicate that students in the countryside, therefore, hold less power than those in the capital. Given that Iceland has a relatively large rural population scattered across the country, this raises questions about the relationship between policy on curriculum autonomy and students' choice in terms of market mechanisms (Waslander et al., 2010) and how, or whether, the policy can overcome the geographical and demographical challenges in the more rural areas.

8.3 What issues and tensions did school leaders and teachers experience in relation to the policy enactment?

The main findings revealed that the policy on school autonomy has had various impacts on the working context of school leaders and teachers. Two subthemes emerged from the overarching theme of 'policy consequences, issues, and tensions in working contexts', namely 'school leadership and managing change' and 'teachers' sense of responsibility and job security'. These subthemes are discussed below.

8.3.1 School leadership and managing change

The findings from this study indicate that policy on school autonomy over the curriculum has changed the role of school leaders, particularly of head teachers, in upper secondary schools in Iceland. All four head teachers interviewed experienced increased responsibility for educational leadership and managing change, and school leaders highlighted the need for greater support and professional discussion in relation to the policy. Several school leaders in the three well-established schools also considered there was an increased need for control and feedback on changes made in schools, for example, by research and by strengthening the external evaluation. As noted in Chapter Five, all the school leaders who participated in the study had experience of managing or teaching at upper secondary school level before 2008, so they had previous experience to make comparisons in this regard.

With respect to the distinction between educational management and educational leadership (Bush, 2020; Connolly et al., 2019; Bush & Glover, 2014), the findings from this study indicate changes in both sources of head teachers' power. The study shows on one hand, how the policy on school autonomy has led to an increase in head teachers' educational management role due to the delegation of authority to make decisions on study offers. On the other hand, the policy has also led to an increase in educational leadership due to their increased responsibility for influencing others to achieve the schools' goals regarding curriculum changes.

The findings from this study are consistent with other research which shows how polices on school autonomy across different countries have led to school leaders' jobs becoming more demanding and complex (Pont, 2020; OECD, 2015; Gobby, 2013; Pont et al., 2008). The findings here indicate that the policy has increased workloads and stress for school leaders, due, in part, to the competitive environment which arises

from the combination of greater autonomy and students' choice. This is in line with Keddie et al. (2020a) and Holm & Lundström (2011); however, this study raises the issue of increased stress on school leaders as managers of change in particular. This relates, on one hand, to divided beliefs and resistance from teachers who wish to defend their academic subjects, something which has been identified as the greatest challenge school leaders face when leading change in their schools (Ragnarsdóttir, 2018b). In addition, this also relates to how changes in study offers inevitably impact teachers' job security, which then increases their resistance to change. However, this study found significant differences between school leaders' experiences in the well-established schools and in School C, as the latter was new, so there was no resistance to changing existing practices, and teachers' job security actually increased due to an increase in the number of students.

Given concerns in the literature and in this study that accountability mechanisms can lead to a narrower curriculum, it is perhaps surprising that the findings showed that school leaders saw a need to strengthen current accountability mechanisms with the advent of increased autonomy. To better understand school leaders' perspective in this regard, it is helpful to consider the difference between vertical and horizontal types of accountability, where the former relates to compliance with laws and regulations and school performance accountability and the latter to professional and multiple school accountability (Hooge et al., 2012). While some school leaders felt that more control was needed, including by strengthening external evaluation, most were not supportive of school performance accountability mechanisms, such as standardised tests. School leaders also raised the issue of the need for greater professional discussion of the policy's implications, more support with quality management, some feedback on the changes made, and research on how these might impact students' progress at university. These findings indicate that school leaders would benefit from more support with evaluating the impact of changes made within the schools.

8.3.2 Teachers' sense of responsibility and job security

Findings from this study indicate that teachers saw an increase in their responsibility for the content of their teaching and for students' study with the advent of the new policy. They also raised the issue of the need for more professional discussion and cooperation between teachers. Findings also indicate that implementing the policy has resulted in increased workloads and impacted teachers' job security. Again, as noted in Chapter Five, most of the teachers had experience of teaching in upper secondary schools before 2008, so they were well-positioned to make comparisons with the period before the policy was introduced.

To better understand how teachers perceive their responsibility, it is useful to recall the distinction between teachers' internal sense of professional responsibility, which can be understood as them holding themselves accountable, and formal mechanisms, such as standardised tests, through which they are held to account (Lauermann & Karabenick,

2011). Findings from this study suggest that teachers hold themselves accountable in various ways, for example, by how well they fulfil their responsibilities to meet students' different needs, to prepare them for university, and to ensure that students who move between schools get their study evaluated properly. However, apart from the journeyman's examination, which pre-dated the policy on curriculum autonomy, teachers did not raise the issue of being held responsible by formal accountability mechanisms.

The findings from this study are consistent with other research which has shown how school autonomy over the curriculum can create tensions for teachers' work, especially if the school's policy and curriculum emphasis does not coincide with their own professional beliefs (Lundström, 2015; Keddie et al., 2011; Lundström & Holm, 2011). In this respect, studies have, for example, revealed tensions arising from the fact that teachers have perceived demands for evaluations and tests as limiting their autonomy and revealing a lack of trust. (Salokangas et al., 2020; Erss et al., 2016; Lundström, 2015). There are no standardised tests for academic study at upper secondary level in Iceland, and the teachers in this study did not report tensions related to school performance accountability or other accountability mechanisms as a general issue; however, most teachers in all four schools were against standardised tests because they felt their controlling effects would work against the policy on increased autonomy.

The case of the journeyman's examination for the certified trades provides an interesting case here. While the teachers in the certified trades viewed it as part of their professional responsibility to prepare students for this standardised test, they reported no limitations on their sense of autonomy as a result. This appears to relate to their sense that they are trusted by the school leadership and experience little interfere in their work. The findings are similar to those in Guðmundsdóttir's and Eiríksdóttir's (2020) study, also in the Icelandic context, and supported by Paradis et al. (2017), who found that while high-stakes examinations impose pressure on teachers, their sense of their own autonomy and the trust placed in them may vary due to the levels of monitoring in each school and their freedom to control their teaching.

In relation to how teachers perceived a greater sense of responsibility with the increased autonomy, it was striking that many highlighted the need for increased cooperation and professional discussion. The distinction between different types of teachers' autonomy made by Frostenson (2015) can be helpful in this respect, with the findings from this study suggesting that, while there was an increase in teachers' *individual* autonomy over the content of their subjects, they felt the need for more *collegial* autonomy, understood as "teachers' collective freedom to influence and decide on practice at a local level" (p. 23). The issue raised here is then to what extent policy on curriculum autonomy has increased the need to strengthen some forms of horizontal accountability (Hooge et al., 2012), notably by encouraging the creation of professional learning communities and greater collaboration.

Overall, the findings are consistent with other research which has shown that increased curriculum autonomy together with outcome-based learning has made teachers' jobs more complicated (Priestley et al., 2014; Kärner et al., 2013; Kuiper & Berkvens, 2013), increased their workloads, and impacted their job security (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021; Hong & Youngs, 2016; Lundström & Holm, 2011). However, this study identified differences both between and within schools in terms of how teachers perceived these effects, for example, in School C, the new school, teachers' job security actually increased due to an increase in the number of students. A significant workload issue also emerged which relates directly to the Icelandic context, namely the need to identify new teaching materials when courses changed, with some teachers having to compile or write material themselves, due to a lack of available textbooks. Given the small market for educational material in Iceland, there are concerns that increased diversity between schools will make it more difficult to find appropriate teaching material, raising issues around teachers' capacity and access to adequate resources to utilise their autonomy. The findings here suggest that this might impact some teachers' views of the policy: while there were teachers in this study who highlighted the positive effects of their autonomy, such as increased job satisfaction, there were also those who felt that the risk of greater workloads would deter teachers from making changes in future.

8.4 What did school stakeholders believe the policy on school autonomy was achieving for students?

The main findings revealed that the policy on school autonomy is believed to have achieved different benefits for students depending on the situated context of their school. Three subthemes emerged from the overarching theme 'accomplished for students - different effects in different contexts'. These are 'diversity, flexibility and student's responsibility', 'equal access and opportunities' and the 'consequences of shortening study programmes for matriculation'. These subthemes are discussed in turn below.

8.4.1 Diversity, flexibility and students' responsibility

The findings from this study indicate that policy on school autonomy over curriculum development has led to increased diversity and flexibility in students' study options. There were examples of new and revised study programmes in all schools, and the choice and flexibility of study within programmes had also increased. However, the extent of the changes varied between and within the schools and between subjects, with some experiencing more than others. While participants reported relatively little overall change in the study content, students' responsibility for their own study had increased, and there were concerns that they might not choose the best options to prepare for university. However, findings also revealed that the changes in assessment and teaching methods in the schools had a positive impact on students' sense that their

study options were suited to their individual needs. In addition, while there was a clear sense that the greater flexibility had increased students' choice, it also made it harder to compare programmes across different schools, making it more difficult for students to have their study evaluated if they wanted to move.

When interpreting the findings described above, it is important to remember that the aim of the policy on school autonomy was to increase the diversity of study and, thereby, to increase students' choice. To better understand the policy effects in this regard, a distinction can be made between educational diversity (Teelken et al., 2005) and individual curriculum choice (Hirsch, 2002). The offer of new study programmes and the use of teaching and assessment methodology better suited to students' needs and other changes in the educational content indicate that educational diversity has increased. In addition, findings suggest there is also more individual curriculum choice, due to students having more control over their study path within the study programmes. Examples of this were found in all schools.

Overall, despite certain similar patterns in the findings between schools, there were also differences within them in terms of what the policy on autonomy over curriculum was believed to have achieved for students. As Bowe et al. (1992) remind us, those who work in schools come with their own backgrounds, experiences, and values, and have a vested interest in how a policy is responded to. This, in turn, can influence how people interpret what the policy has achieved. Prominent in this study, for example, were the divided beliefs in the three well-established schools on the schools' work on changes and what they accomplished for students. For example, in the case of School A and School B, some believed that broader study and free selection was better for students, while others felt that focusing on subjects in more depth was better preparation for university.

8.4.2 Equal access and opportunities

Findings from this study suggest that the policy on school autonomy over curriculum was, to some extent, considered to have increased equity in education. However, these effects were perceived differently between schools. This related, on one hand, to the extent to which the changes made were seen as meeting the particular needs of the students in each school, and, on the other hand, to how far the policy has helped to overcome barriers related to students' unequal access to study. In the case of students in the capital area, this related to the way grades from elementary level affected their opportunities, while, for those in the countryside, geographical barriers were more of an issue.

The above findings recall Bullock and Thomas (2002), who noted that analysis of the effects of policy on school autonomy needs to consider the wider context and look beyond the specific policy aims to examine the implications for equity. In this regard, it is essential to consider the "distribution of educational opportunity between social

groups, ... within social groups, ... and the needs of individuals." (p. 168). In this light, the open study programme for example, which is believed to make it easier for more students to complete matriculation, can be seen as increasing equity in education. In a similar way, the upper secondary programme for students who need more preparation before starting other study programmes might also be seen as increasing students' opportunities. However, concerns were expressed in School A that the autonomy granted to the school had not been used to meet the needs of students with the greatest difficulties in learning and those from unsupportive home backgrounds.

The findings from this study also draw attention to how barriers related to students' access to school and study impacted how the policy was perceived in terms of equity. These barriers took different forms in different areas. In the case of students in the capital, it was clear that admissions criteria based on academic achievement were seen as restricting access to institutional (Teelken et al., 2005) and educational diversity (Hirsch, 2002), whereas, in the countryside, these effects related primarily to geographical barriers. However, findings also suggest that, in some cases, the policy was seen as overcoming these barriers. While access to the highly selective schools in the capital did not change, in the case of School C, the new school in the countryside, it was clear that participants felt that both institutional and educational diversity had increased. Educational diversity also increased in School D; however, it was evident that parents wanted more institutional diversity for their children, and that both parents and students made unfavourable comparisons to what they saw as greater educational diversity in the capital area. This again highlights how the effect of the policy on autonomy must be understood in relation to the schools' different locations.

8.4.3 Consequences of shortening study time for matriculation

The findings from this study indicate that the effects of shortening the study time for matriculations ran counter to the aims of the policy on school autonomy to better meet students' different aims and needs. The student participants in particular felt there was less scope for free selection and that their study time was simply compressed, leading to increased workloads and less time for extra-curricular activities. As such, these findings suggest that the shortening has reduced both students' choice of educational diversity (Teelken et al., 2005) and their individual curriculum choice (Hirsch, 2002). However, there was also evidence that this depended on each school's situation, as these effects were not highlighted in School C, the new school, which had always run its study programmes for matriculation over three years. Findings also indicate that the impact of the shortening was affected by the flexibility of the comprehensive system or changes in the arrangement of teaching at the same time, as was the case in School B.

9 Conclusion

This study aimed to increase understanding of how policy on school autonomy over curriculum development at upper secondary level in Iceland has been understood and enacted by school stakeholders and what they believe it has accomplished for students. The policy was established by law in 2008 and followed by a new National Curriculum Guide in 2011. As discussed in the introduction to the study, at that time there was believed to be a need for more diverse study due to societal changes, and the schools were considered to be in a better position than the MoE to adapt their study offers to better meet local needs. In order to examine the effects of the policy as perceived by a range of school stakeholders, a multiple case study was conducted involving four Icelandic upper secondary schools. These schools were visited in 2018 and interviews conducted with school leaders, teachers, students, and parents. Four research questions were established to guide the study, and the main findings in relation to each of these are summarised below. The chapter then set out the contribution to knowledge made by the study, identifies its limitations, and concludes by proposing recommendations for policy development and sign-posting directions for future research.

9.1.1 Summary of the main findings

RQ1: How did school leaders and teachers interpret the meaning of school autonomy as the policy was enacted within schools?

The overarching theme which emerged from the case studies of the four schools in relation to RQ1 was that of contradictions in the policy and mixed messages. Although many interviewees interpreted the policy as offering considerable autonomy to schools, findings indicate significant shortfalls between their expectations and what they experienced in practice. This related to additional bureaucracy as a result of the new National Curriculum Guide (2011), reduced transparency of study, and the long and complex approval process for new or revised study programmes, all of which raised doubts about the real autonomy given to schools. The requirement from the MoE that schools should shorten the study time for matriculation to three years was also perceived as contradicting the stated policy aims as it reduced flexibility and choice. Although these views were expressed in all four schools, some differences between them were identified. The most visible was how participants from School C thought it had been easier for them to implement the Guide because the school was new, so staff did not experience the issue of trying to fit existing content into the new framework, and the study time for matriculation had been organized as three years from the start.

In terms of *who* got autonomy and *over what* (Simkins, 1997), findings show that the policy was interpreted as a transfer of responsibility for final decision making on study offers and what courses are taught from the MoE to the head teachers. School leaders in general described the policy as demonstrating trust in them and providing an opportunity for change. In the case of teachers, they felt that their autonomy over the content of their teaching had increased due to the less prescriptive nature of the new Guide. However, many reported that they already felt they had considerable autonomy, and some related it to trust from head teachers and little interference in their work rather than the policy.

RQ2: How did different contextual factors affect schools' ability to respond to the policy on increased school autonomy?

The overarching theme which emerged in relation to *RQ2* was the complex interplay of contextual factors which influenced policy making in schools in response to the policy. Findings show that each school's ability to respond to the policy was affected by various factors, notably the ways in which divided professional beliefs among school leaders and teachers in the three well-established schools interacted with school culture, university influence, and school reputation. The influence of this interaction on policy making on curriculum development differed between the schools and worked both for and against ideas about changes. In School C, the new school, by contrast, there was strong internal support for the school's policy changes; however, the school had to make considerable efforts to prove their viability to people and institutions outside the school community.

Financial challenges were experienced as the biggest barriers to enacting the policy by most school leaders in the three well-established schools. The fact that costs had to be met from existing budgets and the need to adapt the teachers' collective agreement to the policy limited their scope to make changes in their study offers. The need for suitable accommodation and equipment was also highlighted as an issue in this respect. Findings also revealed how the interplay between schools' finances and their demographic and geographical contexts had different impacts on their ability to respond to the policy. One issue in particular was the way the allocation model used by the MoE at that time seemed to create financial disincentives for schools to offer places to a more diverse range of students, as they lost funding if students dropped out. Another issue was the challenges schools in the countryside faced in seeking to offer students diverse study close to their home. While this was also an issue for School C, the new school in the countryside, financial challenges were not raised there to the same extent as in the other schools. This is because the school was founded after the establishment of the policy on school autonomy, and after the financial crisis, and work on their study offer and specialisation took advantage of the flexibility of the new policy from the beginning.

Students, parents, and the choices they make were also identified as a significant factor. A key prerequisite for schools to use their autonomy to offer more diverse study is that students are able to make informed decisions and choose options which best meet their needs. However, findings from this study indicate a certain disparity between the stated policy aims and the reality of students' choice of school and study. Many students are believed to be uncertain about the best options for them when they start upper secondary school. In addition to considering their own study interests, participants highlighted influence from elementary level, school reputation, access to university, grades and proximity to home and how these to some extent seem to guide students towards academic programmes, even if they believe vocational study would suit them better.

RQ3: What issues and tensions did school leaders and teachers experience in relation to the policy enactment?

A number of issues and tensions in school leaders' and teachers' working contexts arose as a consequence of the policy. School leaders, in particular head teachers, experienced increased educational responsibility in relation to policy making on study offers and a greater role as managers of change. These changes have increased their workloads and some reported stress due to how work on changes to the study offer impacted the morale in their schools. Tensions highlighted in the three well-established schools related to the divided professional beliefs in the schools and resistance from teachers who sought to defend their academic subjects and their jobs. In contrast, leaders in the new school reported no resistance to changes from teachers. There, teachers had shared views from the beginning, and their job security actually increased because of greater numbers of students. Nonetheless, school leaders across all schools highlighted the need for more professional discussion on the policy and leaders in the three well-established schools also highlighted need for support and feedback on the effects of the changes made in the schools.

In the case of teachers, findings indicate that they feel a greater sense of responsibility for the content of their academic subjects and for students' study. This includes the responsibility to meet students' different needs, to prepare them for university or the journeyman's examination, and to ensure that students who move between schools have their study evaluated properly, something which is more difficult under the new policy. There were also concerns that greater diversity between schools would make it harder to access suitable teaching material, as the market for textbooks would be more fragmented. Teachers reported that they had to create more material themselves, and some felt the risk of increased workloads might lessen teachers' interest in making changes in future. While some teachers reported increased job satisfaction with the advent of the policy, the findings also draw attention to the impact on teachers' job security. Teachers in schools where changes in the course offer were made reported less possibility to teach their specialty, and some described needing to compete with

colleagues to ensure that sufficient numbers of students chose their courses through free selection. Like the school leaders, teachers also identified the need for greater professional discussion and cooperation between teachers with the advent of the policy.

RQ4: What did school stakeholders believe the policy on school autonomy was achieving for students?

The overarching theme which emerged in relation to RQ4 was that the policy has had different effects in different contexts. Findings from this study indicate an increase in the diversity and flexibility of study, with all four schools utilising the policy to introduce new or revised study programmes. Participants also highlighted greater choice and flexibility within the programmes themselves, for example with the introduction of the open study programmes. The upper secondary programme was also highlighted as a way to broaden the study offer and meet students' different needs. At the same time, some participants reported that the greater use of free selection within programmes has increased students´ responsibility for the composition of their study. However, findings also revealed doubts about whether the policy had led to real changes in the content of specific subjects and the overall course offer. Most participants in the three well-established schools reported little change overall, and, while some changes were reported, these varied between subjects, with significant changes in some and very few in others. Although there were concerns that the increased diversity in course offers has made it more difficult for students to have their study evaluated if they change schools, the open study programme is believed to have made this easier. Findings also indicate that students perceive the changes made in teaching and assessment methods as leading to study which is better suited to their different needs.

The above changes indicate that the policy on school autonomy has increased equity in education to some extent. However, these effects were perceived differently between schools, depending on their local context, and related to the extent to which they felt that the particular needs of their students had been met. Within the capital area, students' grades from elementary level were experienced as leading to unequal access to schools and to study, while, in the countryside, geographical barriers were highlighted. In addition, students in the three well-established schools felt that the shortening of the study time for matriculation had compressed their study, reducing the scope for free selection and allowing less time for extra-curricular activities. While this appears to contradict the aims of the policy, these effects were not reported in the new school, which had run three-year study programmes from the very beginning, and this suggests they may be perceived differently in future as the three-year model becomes embedded in schools.

9.1.2 Contribution to knowledge

The above findings have increased understanding of policy on school autonomy at upper secondary level in Iceland from the perspective of school stakeholders and, in doing so, they have contributed to the literature on a complicated phenomenon. In this regard, four aspects are highlighted in particular:

Firstly, the study adds to research which suggest there is a mismatch between expectations of school autonomy from formal policy documents and actual autonomy as experienced by school leaders and teachers. While previous research has linked this to an increase in school performance accountability measures such as national standardised tests (Erss et al., 2016; Higham & Earley, 2013; Hooge et al., 2012; Finnigan, 2007;), this study examines the Icelandic context, which combines a high level of school autonomy over curriculum development (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice, 2020) with an absence of national standardised tests, and shows how other governmental policy initiatives, such as the shortening of the study time for matriculation, increased bureaucracy, and more administration, can also create a disparity between what is expected from policy and what is experienced when enacting the policy in local contexts.

Secondly, this study responds to calls to give more attention to schools' broader contexts when studying policy enactment (Holloway & Keddie, 2020; Ball et al., 2012; Thrupp & Lupton, 2006). The study has increased understanding of the ways in which complex interactions between contextual factors influence and explain how the schools perceived their ability and scope to utilise the policy to make curriculum changes. In particular, it draws attention to the different demographic and geographical contexts of the schools, something which is especially important in Iceland, a small country with many sparsely populated areas.

Thirdly, this study extends research which shows how school autonomy over curriculum has increased workloads and stress for school leaders and teachers (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021; Keddie et al., 2020a; Hong & Youngs, 2016; Lundström & Holm, 2011; Holm & Lundström, 2011) by showing how the policy has created challenges for school leaders as managers of change and the inevitable impact it has had on teachers' job security. The study also draws attention to the small market for educational publishing in Iceland and the concerns that increased diversity in subjects between schools will make it more difficult to access new teaching material.

Fourthly, while numerous studies have focused on how effective school autonomy is with regard to student achievement and different outcome measures (Caldwell, 2016; Grattan Institute, 2013; Honig & Rainey, 2012; Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Santibanez, 2006; Hattie, 1990), this study examines the policy effects in Iceland in terms of what has been accomplished for students, from the perspectives of a range of school stakeholders. Adopting this approach to assess the extent to which the stated policy

aims (including giving students access to more diverse study to better meet their different needs) have been met, has shown how its effects must be understood in relation to the specific context of each school. The study also extends research which has shown how policy on school autonomy can create tensions related to social justice and impact equity in education in negative ways (Keddie, MacDonald, et al., 2020; Keddie, 2016; Smyth, 2011). This study in particular identifies the different barriers experienced by students in the capital and those in the countryside and how these impact the way the policy is perceived in terms of equity and access.

9.1.3 Limitations of the research

All research has limitations (Price and Murnan, 2004), and this study is no exception. The following issues should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings of this study.

This study explores the experience of stakeholders from four upper secondary schools in Iceland. Including more schools in the study would have added more perspectives related to each schools' specific context. When interpreting findings and issue raised from this study, this should be kept in mind; however, care was taken to ensure that the selected schools represented the diversity of upper secondary schools in Iceland (See Chapter 5).

The interviews with stakeholders of the schools were conducted in 2018 and express their experiences of enacting the policy on school autonomy at that time. However, it can take time to understand and implement new polices, and stakeholders experience can change over time. Therefore, the findings from this study should be interpreted with that in mind. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have affected schools' capacity to work on curriculum development; however, further studies are required to assess the impact of the pandemic, as this was beyond the scope of this study.

The interview data is self-reported; however, care has been taken to use documents from the schools as a secondary source for triangulation (See Chapter 5).

It is inevitable that each researcher comes with their own values, which can influence the way data is interpreted. As explained in Chapters 1 and 5 (See 1.1. and 5.1), I have personal experience of enacting the policy on school autonomy examined in this study. Therefore, when interpreting the findings from this study it has to be kept in mind that my work experience along with other personal background might have influenced the interpretation of data and the overall research process. However, I also hope that my background and interest in the topic has supported and contributed to the process.

The findings from this study are limited to data from case studies of four schools. However, care has been taken to use thick description and purposeful selection of schools and stakeholders in order to enhance the potential transferability of the results.

9.1.4 Recommendations for policy development

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations for the further development of the policy on school autonomy over curriculum are proposed:

Firstly, the findings indicate that simplifying the approval process for study programmes would encourage schools to use the policy for continuous development of their study offers. Special consideration should be given to the complex approval process for vocational study programmes;

Secondly, and in relation to new demands, ways to increase support to school leaders and encourage discussion on professional matters on a broader level between schools and across other school levels could be considered. Mechanisms to provide further feedback on the effects of changes made within their schools could also be enhanced;

Thirdly, in response to teachers' increased responsibility for the development of the content of their teaching subjects, ways to facilitate and enhance professional discussion and collaboration between teachers, both within and across schools, should be considered. The scope for professional management to lead teachers' collaboration and work on curriculum changes within the schools needs also to be considered.

9.1.5 Directions for future research

A number of areas emerged from this study which would benefit from further research, as follows:

Findings from this study revealed concerns that the policy on school autonomy over curriculum combined with students' choice might increase stratification between schools. Future research in this area could contribute to better understanding of these effects and how they might be addressed;

Findings also revealed concerns over the shortage of high-quality teaching material for new courses, the burden this placed on teachers, and the possible fragmentation of the small educational publishing market in Iceland. Future research could examine this situation and assess the implications of greater diversity between schools on educational publishing and the quality of study material available to support new programmes;

This study suggests that the policy on school autonomy has not been able to overcome some significant barriers to students' equal access to schools and study. In the case of students in the capital area, for example, grades from elementary level constrained their choice of schools, and students in the countryside faced geographical barriers. Future research could contribute to a better understanding of these barriers and how they might be overcome.

In conclusion, this study on policy on school autonomy over curriculum highlights the importance of understanding the policy enactment with respect to schools' local contexts and the broader national context. Iceland is a small, sparsely-populated country, and its upper secondary schools are considered to have high levels of autonomy over curriculum development (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020), with the aim of enabling schools to adapt their provision to meet students' needs. However, this study has identified various issues concerning the challenges this policy has posed for school leaders and teachers. In addition, the findings suggest that further measures are required if the policy on school autonomy over curriculum development and student choice are to function effectively in the context of the geographical and demographical challenges in Iceland.

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Appendix 1: List of participants

Number of participants by stakeholder group and school. Minimal information is provided about the interviewers for the sake of anonymity and traceability. Each participant was given a code comprising letters and numbers. In this regard, 'I' was used to denote an interview, 'A, B, C or D' to denote the school and '1-18' the individual. For example, when quoting Teacher 6 in School A in the text, the participant becomes (IA6).

Stakeholders	Preferred participants	School A	School B	School C	School D
School leaders	Head teachers, assistant head teachers, curriculum managers	3	3	2	4
	Members of School Board (representatives from the municipality and local economy)	2	2	2	3
Teachers	Teachers in different subjects (core subjects, other subjects, vocational subjects) and careers advisers	5	5	5	5
Students and parents	Members of students' council	3	3	3	3
	Member of parents' council	3	3	2	3
Total number of participants from each school		16	16	14	18

Appendix 2: List of documents

A list of the documents consulted from each school. Minimal information is provided about the documents for the sake of anonymity and traceability. Each document was given a code comprising letters and a number. Thus, 'D' was used to denote a document, 'A, B, C or D' to denote the school, and '1-13' to denote the particular document.

Documents from School A	**Symbol**
Annual Report to the Ministry of Education	DA1
Annual Report to the Ministry of Education	DA2
Annual Report to the Ministry of Education	DA3
Annual Report to the Ministry of Education	DA4
Annual Report to the Ministry of Education	DA5
Annual Report to the Ministry of Education	DA6
External evaluation on School A. Report for the Ministry of Education	DA7
External evaluation on School A. Report for the Ministry of Education	DA8
Self-evaluation report	DA9
Self-evaluation report	DA10
Enrolment. Website	DA11

Documents from School B	**Symbol**
Annual Report to the Ministry of Education	DB1
External evaluation on School B. Report for the Ministry of Education	DB2
Report on changes in School B	DB3
Report on changes in School B	DB4
Admission requirements. Website	DB5

Documents from School C	Symbol
Annual Report to the Ministry of Education	DC1
Annual Report to the Ministry of Education	DC2
Annual Report to the Ministry of Education	DC3
Annual Report to the Ministry of Education	DC4
External evaluation on School C. Report for the Ministry of Education	DC5
School contract School C and the Ministry of Education	DC6
School contract School C and the Ministry of Education	DC7
School contract School C and the Ministry of Education	DC8
Self-evaluation report	DC9
Self-evaluation report	DC10
Report on School C	DC11
Parliamentary document	DC12
Icelandic National Broadcasting	DC13

Documents from School D	Symbol
Annual report to the Ministry of Education	DD1
Annual report to the Ministry of Education	DD2
Annual report to the Ministry of Education	DD3
Annual report to the Ministry of Education	DD4
Annual report to the Ministry of Education	DD5
Annual report to the Ministry of Education	DD6
External evaluation on School D. Report for the Ministry of Education	DD7
School Contract School D and the Ministry of Education	DD8
Report on School D	DD9

Appendix 3: Interview protocols

Interview protocol for school leaders

Introduction and permission to record the interview. Warm up questions.

Topics related to research questions	Interview questions
The creation of the policy and what it is believed to have accomplished.	What do you think of the policy on giving schools more autonomy over the curriculum? What do you think this policy has accomplished or will accomplish for students? Can you tell me about the main changes that have taken place in the school's study programme offer and the content of study related to increased school autonomy over curriculum development? What do you believe have been the main impetus for changes in study programmes offer and content of study?
How autonomy has been enacted in respect to whom have been involved in decision making.	How have the perspectives of the school's stakeholders been sought regarding the content and structure of study in the school? Who has been involved in decision making regarding the changes in the study programmes offer and the content of education?
Changes in working context. Communication and collaboration within and outside the school.	Can you describe how your own job has changed with the advent of increased school autonomy over curriculum development? Can you describe how you think the policy has influenced teachers' jobs? Can you tell me about changes in collaboration within the school related to increased school autonomy over curriculum? Can you tell me about changes in collaboration and the school's relationships with parents, the local community and economy, and other schools?
How have factors in the school's context influenced the enactment of the policy?	Can you tell me about factors in the school's context which you think have had an impact on changes made to study programmes and the content of study? How have these factors influenced changes in study programmes and the content of study?
Accountability.	What is the school's policy regarding the arrangement for study assessment? What would you think if standardised tests were used in upper secondary schools? What do you think of universities' entrance test for admission? How easy do you think it is for students to get an appraisal of their studies if they move between upper secondary schools? How does the school use the internal evaluation? How do you think the quality of education in upper secondary schools should be evaluated?
What is the policy believed to have accomplished?	Overall, to what extent do you think the changes which have been made in response to the policy on increased school autonomy over curriculum have succeeded?
	Is there anything else you would like to add to our conversation?

Interview protocol for school leaders (School boards)

Introduction and permission to record the interview. Warm up questions.

Topics related to research questions	Interview questions
The creation of the policy and what it is believed to have accomplished.	What do you think of the policy on giving schools more autonomy over the curriculum? What do you think this policy has accomplished or will accomplish for students? Can you tell me about recent changes in study programmes and course units in the school? What do you believe have been the main impetus for changes in study programmes offer and content of education? What do you think about the facilities for studying in the school?
How autonomy has been enacted in respect to who has been involved in decision making.	How have the perspectives of the School Board been sought regarding the content and structure of education in the school? Can you tell me about your involvement in decision making regarding changes in the study programme offer in the school? For instance, the development of new study programmes or course units. How have these decisions been taken? How do you see the relationship of the school with the local community and economy? Does it feel like this relationship has been changing?
Accountability.	What do you think is the school's speciality? Can you tell me about the types of methods used for study assessment in your school? How do you think study assessment should be? What would you think if standardised tests were used in upper secondary schools? What do you think of universities' entrance test for admission? How easy do you think it is for students to get an appraisal of their education if they move between upper secondary schools? How do you think the quality of education in upper secondary schools should be evaluated?
	Is there anything else you would like to add to our conversation?

Interview protocol for teachers and careers advisers

Introduction and permission to record the interview. Warm up questions.

Topics related to research questions	Interview questions
The creation of the policy and what it is believed to have accomplished.	What do you think of the policy on giving schools more autonomy over the curriculum? What do you think this policy has accomplished or will accomplish for students?

	Can you tell me about the main changes that have taken place in the courses you currently teach, or have been teaching, related to increased school autonomy over curriculum development? *If a careers adviser, then use the following question:* Can you tell me about the main changes that have taken place in the school's study programme offer and the content of study related to increased school autonomy over curriculum development? What do you believe have been the main impetus for changes in the study programme offering and the content of study?
How autonomy has been enacted in respect to who has been involved in decision making.	How have the perspectives of the school's stakeholders been sought regarding the content and structure of study in the school? Can you tell me about your involvement in decision making regarding the changes in study programmes and the content of study in the school? How have these decisions been taken?
Changes in working context. Communication and collaboration within and outside the school.	Can you describe how your own job has changed with the advent of increased school autonomy over curriculum development? Can you tell me about changes in collaboration within the school related to increased school autonomy over curriculum? Can you tell me about changes in collaboration and the schools' relationships with parents, the local community and economy, and other schools?
How have factors in the school's context influenced the enactment of the policy?	Can you tell me about factors in the school's context which you think have had an impact on changes made to study programmes and the content of study? How have these factors influenced changes in study programmes and the content of study?
Accountability.	What is the school's policy regarding the arrangement for study assessment? What would you think if standardised tests were used in upper secondary schools? What do you think of universities' entrance test for admission? How easy do you think it is for students to get an appraisal of their education if they move between upper secondary schools? How does the school use the internal evaluation? How do you think the quality of education in upper secondary schools should be evaluated?
What is the policy believed to have accomplished?	Overall, to what extent do you think the changes which have been made in response to the policy on increased school autonomy over curriculum have succeeded?
	Is there anything else you would like to add to our conversation?

Interview protocol for students

Introduction and permission to record the interview. Warm up questions.

Topics related to research questions	**Interview questions**
What is the policy on school autonomy over curriculum believed to have accomplished for students?	Can you tell me about your reasons for choosing this school? Can you tell me about who or what influenced your choice of school? Can you tell me why you chose the study programme you are in? What other study programmes did you consider when you were choosing this study programme? Can you tell me what kind of information you looked up and where when you were in the process of choosing this study programme and school? Did you feel as if you had a lot of choice and freedom when you were in the process of choosing your school and study programme? In what way? Do you think, in general, that students can choose among many study programmes after they finish elementary school? Why does it matter? Do you think students' choices of study programmes after elementary school have increased? In what way? Can you tell me about recent changes in study programmes and course units in the school? Why do you think these changes have been made? Are there a lot of free options to choose among course units on your study programme? What can you choose? How well do you think the needs of students who have not got high enough grades from elementary school are met? Can you describe how well, in general, you think the study programmes you are in are preparing you for the future? What do you think about the facilities for studying in your school?
How autonomy has been enacted in respect to who has been involved in decision making?	Have your perspectives been sought regarding the content and structure of education in the school? How? Can you tell me about your involvement, or that of other students, in decision making regarding the changes in the study programme offer in the school? For instance, the development of new study programmes or course units. How have these decisions been taken?
Accountability	What do you think is the school's speciality? Can you tell me about the type of methods which are used for study assessment in your school? How do you think your study should be assessed? What would you think if standardised tests were used in upper secondary schools? What do you think of universities' entrance test for admission? How easy do you think it is for students to get an appraisal of their education if they move between upper secondary schools?
	Is there anything else you would like to add to our conversation?

Interview protocol for parents

Introduction and permission to record the interview. Warm up questions.

Topics related to research questions	**Interview questions**
What is the policy on school autonomy over curriculum believed to have accomplished for students?	Can you tell me about the reasons why your child did chose this school? Can you tell me about the reasons why your child chose the study programme they are in now? Can you tell me about your participation in your child's choice of school and study programme? How did that work? What other study programmes did you and your child consider when your child was choosing a study programme? Can you tell me about the kind of information you looked up and considered when you were taking part with your child in the process of choosing a study programme and school? Did you feel that your child had a lot of choice and freedom regarding the process of choosing a school and study programme? In what way? Why does it matter? Do you feel that your child has a lot of free options to choose among course units on their study programme? What can they choose between? Can you describe how well, in general, you think the study programmes your child/children are in are preparing them for the future? Do you think your child's/children's choice of study programmes after elementary school has increased? In what way? Can you tell me about recent changes in study programmes and course units in the school? Why do you think these changes have been made? What do you think increased diversity in study paths and study programmes will accomplish for students? How much do you think making a choice of study programmes right after elementary school suits students? How well do you think the needs of students who have not got high enough grades from elementary schools are met? What do you think about the facilities for studying in the school?
How autonomy has been enacted in respect to who has been involved in decision making?	How have the perspectives of parents been sought regarding the content and structure of study in the school? What kind of perspectives have been sought among parents? Can you tell me about your involvement, or that of other parents, in decision making regarding the changes in the study programme offer in the school? For instance, the development of new study programmes or course units. How have these decisions been taken?

Accountability.	What do you think is the school's speciality? Can you tell me about the type of methods which are used for study assessment in the school? How do you think study should be assessed? What would you think if standardised tests were used in upper secondary schools? What do you think of the university entrance test for admission? How easy do you think it would be for your child to get their study appraised if they wanted to move to another upper secondary schools? How do you think the quality of education in upper secondary schools should be evaluated?
	Is there anything else you would like to add to our conversation?

Appendix 4: Letter to schools

Invitation to school to participate in the PhD research project "The enactment of a policy on increased upper secondary school autonomy over curriculum in Iceland"

School
Address
Head teacher

Place and date

Dear recipient.

The purpose of this letter is to request participation of XXXX school in my PhD research project at School of Education – The University of Nottingham. The topic of the research project is the policy towards increased upper secondary school autonomy over curriculum as established by the Upper Secondary Education Act no. 92/2008 and followed by new National Curriculum Guide in 2011. In an accompanying document with this letter is an information sheet which I have prepared for participants. It includes more detailed information about the research project and the research questions.

The research is a multiple case study and four upper secondary schools have been selected to participate in the research project. The criteria for selection were to choose schools from the capital area and the countryside, to include different schools with regard to their offer of academic and vocational studies, and schools with different histories. Interviews and documents will be the main sources for data collection. The documents will partly be accessible from the school's websites, but I would also like the school's permission to examine other possible documents of relevance, for example records of meetings where school autonomy has been discussed. The participants in the interviews for each school are as follows:

- Three school leaders (head teacher, assistant head teacher or curriculum manager or head of department)
- Four teachers and a careers adviser (two teachers of core subjects and two teachers of vocational subjects or of other course subjects in cases where vocational subjects are not part of the school's study programmes)
- Three students (group interview)
- Three parents of students (group interview)
- Three representatives from the local authority and the local economy (one from the local authority and two from the economy (group interview)

The interviews will be semi-structured with open questions, and each will take about one hour. Care will be taken to protect schools and the participants from any possible negative consequences. To safeguard confidentiality, full anonymity will be provided, both with regard to the name of the school and so the words of interviewees will not be traceable. All data of the research will be stored in a secure place for seven years from the date of publication and then destroyed. Only the researcher and the research supervisors will have access to the data, and the data will only be used for the purpose of the research.

The research project has been reported to The Icelandic Data Protection Authority in accordance with Act no. 77/2000 on The Protection of Privacy as Regards the Processing of Personal Data; as amended. The research will also be conducted in accordance with the University of Nottingham's Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics.

Each participant will receive an information sheet and a formal invitation letter. Participants will be asked to sign informed consent. In cases, where students are under 18 years, students' parents will also be asked to sign the informed consent. The plan is for data collection to take place during XXXX to XXXX 2018. I will seek assistance from the school to provide the information sheet and invitation letter to students, staff and parents. I will also ask the school for a room for the interviews. I hope this research can be an important contribution to policy making in education and that it will increase understanding of the complicated interplay between factors which affect the school's function when enacting a policy on increased school autonomy.

The participation of your school in the research project is very important. I would be extremely grateful if the school would agree to participate and thereby assist me with conducting the study.

With best regards,
Kolfinna Jóhannesdóttir
Mobile: 8661314/ kolfinna.johannesdottir@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 5: Consent form

Informed consent for participation in research

Project title: The Enactment of Policy on Increased Upper Secondary School Autonomy in Iceland

PhD Research Project, School of Education, The University of Nottingham

Name of researcher: Kolfinna Jóhannesdóttir

Name of supervisor: Dr Andy Townsend

I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.

- I agree to take part in the research project. I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage without having to provide reasons and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.

- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified, and my personal results will remain confidential. I understand that all the information provided will only be used for academic purposes.

- I understand that I will be audio recorded during the interview. I understand that data will be stored by the researcher in the original form as audio recordings and as a written transcript in a password-protected computer including backups. Access will be limited to the researcher and the research supervisors.

- I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the research. I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisor if I require further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if I wish to make a complaint related to my involvement in the research.

Signed .....Date .....

Research participant

Signed .....

Parents/guardians of student under 18 years if appropriate

Signed .....

Researcher

Contact details

Researcher: kolfinna.johannesdottir@nottingham.ac.uk mobile: 8661314

Supervisor: andrew.townsend@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator:
educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

The informed consent is in duplicate and the participant holds a copy