Academies

Research priorities and questions

March 2014

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General approach to research needs and priorities

This paper is one of a series of 15 which aims to:

- promote the importance of robust quantitative evidence, in combination with other methods, to increase understanding of 'what works' in education and children's services;
- identify evidence gaps and promote discussion of them with the research community, practitioners and other stakeholders;
- initiate collaboration with the research community, practitioners and other stakeholders to research these issues; and,
- support work that helps understand and tackle the barriers to evidence based practice, including how to make evidence accessible to practitioners.

The principles behind the department's research strategy are inspired by Ben Goldacre's vision[1] in the Department for Education Analytical Review[2]. In future, the development and use of evidence should be increasingly driven and owned by the research community, sector bodies and practitioners.

The published suite of priority and question papers between them cover the department's key areas of work and provides a coherent strategic context for the research community, sector bodies and practitioners as well as the department, to plan and prioritise research. The department will continue to commission research, informed by the published priority questions

Views about the research questions and priority papers, recent findings, on-going research or evidence gaps are warmly welcomed. We will also be arranging a series of discussions throughout 2014 with practitioners, the research community and other stakeholders to discuss views and help shape departmental plans to filling evidence gaps. If you want to be involved please email us at: Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk, follow us on Twitter (@educationgovuk) or like us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/educationgovuk).

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[1] Goldacre, B.(2013), Building Evidence into Education
[2] The Department for Education (2013), Analytical Review: The Department

Academies: the policy context

Evidence shows that there is a clear link between autonomy, accountability and high standards[3]. In 2010, legislation was introduced to make it easier for all schools to convert to academies, and many schools are now benefitting from the freedoms that the academy status brings to them to raise standards.

Our ambition is for more schools to convert to academies so that more school leaders are able to raise standards and innovate through exercising their freedoms over pay and conditions, and over the curriculum - tailoring the education they provide to the school's specific circumstances, and to the needs of pupils, parents and their communities - all within a clear accountability framework[4].

Academy schools were initially introduced in 2000, as sponsored academies, to tackle poor performing secondary schools. Where schools are not providing a good enough education for their pupils they are being partnered with strong sponsors with an excellent track record of raising standards. Sponsored academies remain an essential part of the overall drive to raise educational standards in England whereby chronic underperformance in schools is tackled swiftly:

- turning the weakest schools into academies;
- facilitating a market in which school improvement drives up standards promoting excellent governance;
- through a tougher Ofsted inspection regime; and
- publishing more and better performance data to allow greater accountability to parents, local communities and the media.

Whether schools become academies alone, in chains or in groups, our vision is for a system led by excellent school leaders[5] and strong governance, and where outstanding academies take on responsibility for turning round less successful schools and become system leaders themselves.

The academies programme is expanding rapidly and Government is keeping its development under close view. Whilst we are bearing down on the costs of the programme, we are tracking impact achieved, and we recently published a framework[6] setting out the three key elements to be considered when assessing value for money and which applies to academies of all kinds: inputs, outputs and outcomes.

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[3] The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2013), PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices (Volume IV)

[4] Accountability and governance will be addressed in a separate paper available from the research priorities pages on gov.uk website.

[5] Department for Education (2012), Research Priorities and Questions: Teachers and Teaching

[6] Department for Education (2013), Academies and free schools programmes: assessing value for money

Research Summary and gaps

The rapid development of the academies programme has attracted significant attention from researchers and much evidence is available on autonomy, accountability and high standards. Key research includes:

- Machin and Vernoit (2011)[7] which shows that the sponsored academies programme, with its benefits of greater autonomy, freedom and flexibility, leads to improved results; and which also shows that the quality of pupil intake in academies in terms of KS2 results improved from the pre-academy intake – findings corroborated by the National Audit Office (2010)[8] which reports a clear lift in performance after schools become academies, and by the Public Accounts Committee (2011)[9] which reports that academies achieved rapid academic improvements in the most deprived areas of the country.
- Robert Hill's work (2012)[10] on the growth of chains which highlights the importance and strength of governance in academy chains, and links membership of chains and academy performance by showing that chains comprising three or more academies improve faster than other academies.
- The Academies Commission's report (2013)[11] on what academies mean for a self-improving school system which reports that whilst "the introduction of academies provided much vitality to the school system gaining academy status is not sufficient on its own to affect improvement", and which recommends three areas to focus on: teaching and pupils' outcomes, a fair and accessible system and greater accountability.
- ISOS Action Research (2012) on the impact on local partnerships[12] which provides insight on how the education landscape is evolving, and which highlights the importance of collaboration and of clear governance structure.

As well as the above key reports, there is also good international evidence[13][14] that school autonomy (accompanied by accountability) is linked with improving/high performing education systems.

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[7] Machin, S. and Vernoit, J. (2011), Changing School Autonomy: Academy Schools and their Introduction to England's Education, LSE: Centre for the Economics of Education

[8] National Audit Office (2010), Department for Education: The Academies Programme

[9] The Public Accounts Commission (2011) Seventeenth Report

[10] Hill et al (2012), The growth of academy chains: implications for leaders and leadership, National College for School Leadership

[11] The Academies Commission (2013), Unleashing greatness: getting the best from an academised system

[12] ISOS Partnership (2012), Action research into the evolving role of the local authority in education, Department for Education and Local Government Association

[13] Hanushek, E. Link, S. Wößmann, L. (2011) Does School Autonomy Make Sense Everywhere? Panel Estimates from PISA

With the research evidence primarily based on secondary schools and with more and more primary schools becoming academies, further evidence is needed on what drives those schools to become academies and what makes them viable and sustainable. Hill (2010)[15] highlights strong grounds for developing federations and chains to support the development of primary schools and their pupils.

'Greater freedom' is an important element of the academies programme. For example, the National College[16] reports on how sponsored academies have used their freedoms to develop strategies to improve the quality of teaching and learning and learning outcomes. The report also gives some early indications on how this relates to converter academies. With converters now representing the majority of academies, more research is needed on how freedoms are being used by both sponsored and converter academies to drive improvement.

Finally, evidence shows that academy chains can help develop future leaders of the teaching profession and raise standards and. The Public Accounts Committee[17] states that "sponsored academies see collaboration across chains or clusters of academies as the way forward which will help to further raise standards and develop future leaders". And Ofsted (2012)[18] highlights that sponsor led academies, and particularly those which are part of a well-managed group or chain of schools, can make a positive difference. However, there is less evidence on the extent to which greater school autonomy increases innovation

Overall, the research clearly tells us that the basic principles of the academies programme are founded on good evidence. With Machin and Vernoit (2011)[19] and the National Audit Office (2010)[20] having suggested that academies would require a couple of years to bed down before their real impact is observable, and with a rapidly changing landscape where more than 3000 schools are academies, our focus is now shifting to evidence of what best drives 'excellence' and 'innovation' within the academies system in England in order to enable wider 'self-improvement' and what characterises those terms in different academies models.

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[14] Wößmann, L., and Fuchs, T. (2004) What Accounts for International Differences in Student Performance? A Re-examination Using PISA Data (CESifo Working Paper No.1235). Munich, Germany: Center for Economic Studies

[15] Hill, R (2010), Chain reactions: a think piece on the development of chains of schools in the English School system, National College for School Leadership

[16] National College (2011), Academies: research into the leadership of sponsored and converting academies

[17] The Public Accounts Commission (2011) Seventeenth Report

[18] Ofsted (2012). The report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills. Schools.

[19] Machin, S. and Vernoit, J. (2011), Changing School Autonomy: Academy Schools and their Introduction to England's Education, LSE: Centre for the Economics of Education

[20] National Audit Office (2010), Department for Education: The Academies Programme

Future Priorities

Our research needs now are for evidence that will help towards a self-improving education system by enabling system leaders, head teachers, governors and Chief Executives of academy chains to make the best possible decisions and to maximise the benefits of academy status. We are keen to identify any models or examples of good practice and 'what works' in an academy setting, and for those to be shared across the academy network.

The research questions identified below are intended as broad prompts and are roughly set out in order of priority in each section; they have been formulated to help identify where further analytical and evaluative work might most usefully be focussed – whether that is undertaken by Government, by independent researchers, or by schools and governors themselves. The questions are not mutually exclusive and it is likely that research will highlight links between different priorities. For example, a study into academies' performance may highlight how they are using their freedoms.

The questions are intended to be reviewed by the department at regular intervals as gaps are addressed and new areas for investigation arise.

We identify the following research needs for the department and the sector:

Performance

With an education landscape radically different to when the academy programme started, we want to know how strong performance in academies, both sponsored and converters but also in primary, special and alternative provision academies, is best achieved and what characterises those academies.

- To what extent do high performing academies have a ripple effect on local schools, and what are the characteristics of those that do, including their relationship with their local authority?
- To what extent does performance and viability relate to particular characteristics (eg. the size / growth of the academies and /or chain, the school improvement model they are using, etc)?
- What motivates primary schools to become academies and what are the key elements for them to achieve and sustain long term improvement and viability? For example, are particular academy governance structures more attractive to them, and if so, why?
- How can Dioceses best add value and drive improvement with academies, and what are the characteristics of those Dioceses which do this best?

Leadership and development

With strong leadership still being regarded as a fundamental element of an academy's success, we want to find out how this is being developed and maintained.

- What characteristics are most important in effective sponsorship?
- How do academy chains develop and maintain effective leadership (incl. at sponsor level where there is one) and management skills within the chain, and how do they develop and train teachers and school leaders across their chains?
- What are the characteristics of succession planning in the best performing chains? And how do standalone academies plan for sustainability and succession planning?
- What characteristics are most important for effective continuous professional development models, performance management and pay systems?

Moving towards a self-improving system

Our ambition is for an education system where schools support each other in order to raise their or others' educational performance. School to school support can take many forms and we are interested to know what works best in which scenarios.

- How are academies contributing to a wider system of self-improvement? What part do external challenge and the use of data play in supporting this, particularly in identifying failure before it occurs?
- What partnership models, including those with teaching schools, are most effective for driving and sustaining improvement for themselves, for their chain and for their local area?
- What factors are most important for achieving growth/expansion whilst sustaining improvement? For example, can standalone academies successfully manage the transition to leading a chain of their own?

Innovation

With more and different types of schools now able to benefit from even greater freedoms (e.g. over the curriculum), we want to know how those freedoms are used and their relationship to innovation and performance, including continuous improvement, accountability and system leadership.

- How do academies / chains use their new freedoms to encourage and unleash innovation? And is there a risk of particular chain models hampering innovation?
- Are there any additional freedoms or accountability measures that would further drive improvement?
- What do 'innovation' and 'continuous improvement' look like in different scenarios?

Academies and governance

There are now many types of academy governance[21] structures, including single academy trusts, sponsored academies, multi-academy trusts and umbrella trusts. We want to understand the factors that determine the most effective governance structures for driving and maintaining success in academies in different circumstances.

- How do academy trusts use their new responsibilities and freedoms to improve the governance of academies? What are the success factors and what stands in the way?
- Are there any particular governance structures spanning more than one academy which are more effective in dealing with failure and/or maintaining high standards?

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[21] Accountability and governance will be addressed in a separate paper available, once published, from the research priorities pages on gov.uk website.

Engaging with Future priorities

We would like individuals or organisations to respond to this and you can do this in various ways:

- Share with DfE any existing research evidence or current work relevant to questions. Email to Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk.
- Prioritise research effort or bids in the light of the evidence questions.
- Debate evidence gaps and priorities with your own associations or other stakeholders. DfE would be interested to hear any views emerging - email as above.
- Follow us and join the discussion on Twitter (@educationgovuk)
- Like us on Facebook (www.facebook.com/educationgovuk)