



Department
for Education

Assessment Curriculum and Qualifications

Research priorities and questions

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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 vision¹ in the Department for Education Analytical Review². 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).

¹ Goldacre, B.(2013), [Building Evidence into Education](#)

² The Department for Education (2013), [Analytical Review: The Department](#)

Assessment Curriculum and qualifications: the policy context

One of the department's key priorities is to have better educated pupils. This can be achieved by setting higher expectations of what pupils are taught and what they can achieve through the national curriculum, key stage assessments and general qualifications.

Our reforms to school accountability signal the importance of high achievement and progress in core academic subjects for all pupils as part of a broad and balanced curriculum. The new curriculum will give schools and teachers greater freedom to teach in the way they know works and ensure that all pupils acquire a core of essential knowledge in English, mathematics and sciences. The department will also seek to address literacy standards in schools so pupils develop good reading skills early. Schools will use a range of new approaches to assess and report pupil achievement and progress.

National assessments and qualifications will be increasingly rigorous and respected. End of key stage assessments will be revised to reflect the expectations of the new national curriculum. GCSEs will be reformed to ensure that young people have access to qualifications that set expectations that match those in the highest performing nations. The reformed GCSEs will remain universal qualifications, with a balance of more challenging subject content and more rigorous assessment structures, enabling pupils achieving higher grades to progress to A levels. The Russell Group and other leading universities will have a greater role in the design of new A levels.

Employers, universities and colleges are keen for greater reassurance that pupils who achieve levels of performance in English and mathematics are literate and numerate. We will raise the bar so that all pupils are provided with the opportunity to succeed and compete with their international peers, and everyone has confidence that GCSEs properly identify whether pupils have a sound understanding of the subject studied and are ready to move on to further study. We will also seek to increase the take-up of mathematics among all 16-18 year olds and of science, particularly A levels, among girls.

The department is also committed to increasing pupil participation in sport, music and cultural activities so that it becomes the norm. In addition to curriculum and qualification reforms in these areas, we are investing significant resourcing in primary school sport, over £450m from 2013 to 2016 and over £120m over 2013-2015 in music hubs.

These reforms seek to improve teaching and pupil attainment across a wide range of curriculum areas and at all stages of learning.

Research Summary and evidence gaps

Curriculum and Assessment

The new national curriculum comes into effect in September 2014 and seeks to improve pupils' learning in core subjects, but also to broaden their learning across the curriculum. Over time we will analyse KS2 and GCSE results following this change. In the short-term, we will check **schools' readiness to deliver the new curriculum in 2014**.

The new national curriculum creates demands on teachers' subject knowledge and schools will need to address this by accessing continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities. Research following the introduction of the national curriculum in 1988 found that teachers perceived themselves as most competent in English and maths and least competent to deliver teaching in science, music and technology.³ The department would like evidence on **how the CPD market is developing as teachers increasingly look online and adapt and share materials**.

Academies and Free Schools, while required to teach a broad and balanced curriculum, do not have to teach the new national curriculum. However, evidence suggests that many academies are teaching the current national curriculum⁴ and we expect that many will follow the new one from 2014. The department will monitor take-up of the new national curriculum among academies and free schools, but more in-depth evidence on the **extent to which the new national curriculum is being applied across these schools and how curriculum freedoms are being used** will help inform future policy direction.

As part of the national curriculum reforms, the current system of 'levels' used to report children's attainment and progress will be removed. The new programmes of study set out what should be taught by the end of each key stage and schools will be able to introduce their own approach to formative and summative assessment to support pupil attainment and progression. The assessment framework should be built into the school curriculum, so that schools can check what pupils have learned and whether they are on track to meet expectations at the end of the key stage, and so that they can report to parents. The department is interested in the **efficacy of different assessment systems, the extent to which innovative approaches to formative assessment are employed in schools** and whether new measures of pupil progress are understood by pupils and parents. On-going research will report on the impact of the statutory phonics screening test on reading ability and whether the attainment gap is shrinking as a result.

³ Wragg, E.C., Bennett, S.N. & Carre, C.G. (1989). [Primary teachers and the national curriculum](#). Research Papers in Education, 4, 17-45.

⁴ Bassett et al. (2012). [Plan A+ Understanding the potential of academies](#), Reform.

We are committed to raising pupil participation in music and cultural activities and are working together with the Arts Council England to monitor this. We are also committed to raising pupil participation in PE and sport and are providing additional ring-fenced funding to primary schools, over three years, to improve the quality of their PE and sport provision. The department is undertaking research into how the Primary School PE and Sport premium is being spent and the impact of this new funding on schools and pupils. We are also providing additional funding to boost the Taking Part Survey⁵ in order to achieve a robust measure of secondary school sport participation and provision.

The department would like to get more young people interested in maths and science post-16, especially girls. While the number of girls taking physics GCSE is now similar to the number of boys, and girls achieve as well as boys, physics is the 4th most popular subject for boys at A-level, but only the 19th most popular for girls.⁶ While there has been research which has identified how to engage girls in physics^{7,8} we would like to know more about how to engage young people and increase pupil participation in strategically important subjects such as maths and science.

Qualifications

GCSE reforms are underway and will focus on more challenging subject content and more rigorous assessment structures. At the higher end they will provide proper preparation for A levels. Teaching will begin in English language, English literature and mathematics in 2015 and from 2017 we will be able to monitor the impact of the reforms on attainment. In the short term, we will use a number of routes to check schools' readiness to teach the reformed GCSEs.

Evidence suggests that academic qualifications have currency with employers. They are well understood and valued as signals of a potential employee's likely productivity; the stability of the relationship between qualification levels and earnings suggests that this has not changed much over time. However, there is less evidence regarding the **returns of different qualifications and different combinations of qualifications in the labour market, and how these changed over time.**

⁵ The Taking Part survey is a household survey managed by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport that collects sport participation data on adults and children.

⁶ Institute of Physics (2012). [It's different for girls: the influence of schools](#). Institute of Physics: London.

⁷ Murphy, P. & Whitelegg, E. (2012). [Girls in the physics classroom: a review of the research on the participation of girls in physics](#). Institute of Physics: London.

⁸ Daly, A., Grant, L. & Bultitude, K. (2009). [Girls into physics – action research](#). DCSF Research Brief 103.

Future Priorities

Looking ahead and building on current knowledge and plans, we identify the following research questions:

Curriculum

- How ready are primary and secondary schools to teach the new national curriculum in 2014?
- How are maintained schools using their freedom following the slimmed down national curriculum?
- How have schools chosen to implement the new national curriculum? Did they introduce subjects piecemeal over time?
- What are the pros and cons of different types of course materials such as text books, whole course materials or online materials?
- How are schools and teachers accessing materials and Continuing Professional Development in order to deliver the new national curriculum?
- What is the effect of the new national curriculum on raising attainment?

Assessment

- What is the efficacy of different assessment systems in capturing and improving pupil progress, including low-stakes summative testing?
- Are innovative approaches to formative assessment employed in schools?
- Do parents understand the new methods of assessing and reporting their child's progress?

Qualifications

- How ready are secondary schools and post-16 providers to teach the new GCSEs and A levels from 2015?
- What are the returns to different qualifications, different combinations of qualifications and different curricula in the labour market and how are these changing over time?
- Are there differences in labour market and life outcomes associated with studying an academic core to age 16, compared with the study of other subjects?
- How might an increase in maths skills post-16 (at both advanced and intermediate level) influence the jobs and higher education choices for young people?

Pupil Participation

- What is the most effective way of increasing young people's take-up and attainment of strategically important subjects, especially science and maths?
- What is the most effective way to increase girls' take-up of maths and science, particularly at A level?
- How are schools making effective use of the new funding on PE and sports and are sustainable improvements in the provision of PE being made?
- Has the impetus and funding directed at PE and sport resulted in sustainable increases in the number of pupils undertaking a wide range of sports?

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)



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