



Department
for Education

Free schools, university technical colleges (UTCs) and studio schools

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](#)

Free schools, UTCs and studio schools: the policy context

We want to improve our education system so that all children thrive and prosper, regardless of their background. The free schools programme is an important part of the department's vision for a more autonomous and self-improving school system. It also aims to introduce greater choice by establishing new schools, which will seek to drive up standards through increasing local competition. The programme aims to be responsive to:

- the need for pupil places;
- the need for an alternative to low quality local provision; and
- local demand for new provision (including innovative and distinctive models).

Evidence shows that there is a clear link between autonomy, accountability and high standards³. In 2010, legislation was introduced to make it easier for talented and committed teachers, charities, parents and education experts to open new schools where they identify a need in their area. They are able to do this independently of the local authority by submitting an application directly to the Department for Education. These new schools are established as academies and benefit from the freedoms that the academy status brings to them to raise standards.

There are a number of different types of free school, including, mainstream, 16-19 free schools, special and alternative provision free schools, University Technical Colleges (UTCs) and studio schools. More information about the characteristics of these schools is available on the [department's website](#).

The free schools programme is expanding rapidly since the first schools opened in September 2011. There are now 174 open free schools and 45 open UTCs and studio schools and we are looking to support even more of these schools to open where they are most needed. The demand for new free schools continues to be high and in response to the large number of applications the department has received, we have moved from accepting applications at a single point in the year to three application windows per year.

³ The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2011), [PISA in Focus No. 9](#)

Research summary and gaps

As academies, free schools, UTCs and studio schools have greater autonomy over curriculum, budget and staffing than other types of state funded schools. There is robust international evidence that school autonomy (accompanied by accountability) is linked with improving/high performing education systems⁴. The academies research priorities and questions paper⁵ also provides detailed evidence of the positive impact of academies on a self-improving school system in England.

There is also good international evidence of the potential positive impact of the free schools programme taken from similar programmes in the US and Sweden. Studies have shown that US charter schools have a positive effect on educational outcomes for students from certain disadvantaged areas.⁶ They have also shown how charter schools are closing the gap between inner-city neighbourhood students and those from the wealthiest suburbs⁷.

The largest, longest and most robust study of Sweden's free schools found that they had a significant (though not large) positive impact on average educational results (Bohlmak and Lindahl 2012)⁸. The study also positively links free schools with longer-term education outcomes, such as high school grades and university entry. It is known that Sweden has recently seen a relative decline in its position in PISA performance tables but no studies have found this to be related to the introduction of free schools.

Although we are still some years from having a full set of performance data for new free schools, UTCs and studio schools, we continue to monitor pupil take-up and other

⁴ Hanushek, E. Link, S. Wößmann, L. (2011) [Does School Autonomy Make Sense Everywhere? Panel Estimates from PISA](#)

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

OECD (2007) [PISA 2006: Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World Paris](#): OECD

Mourshed, Chijoke and Barber (2010) McKinsey & Company, [How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better](#)

⁵ The Academies Research Priorities and Questions paper is available, from the [research priorities pages](#) on gov.uk website.

⁶ CREDO (2013) [National Charter School Study](#)

⁷ Hoxby, C.M., Murarka, S., and Kang, J (2009) [How New York City's Charter Schools Affect Achievement, The New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project](#). NBER

Sean Reardon's report '[A Review of "How New York City's Charter Schools Affect Achievement"](#)' challenges the findings saying the effect is exaggerated due to methodology.

Angrist J., Dynarski S., Kane T., Pathak P., and Walters C. (2010) [Inputs and Impacts in Charter Schools](#): KIPP Lynn

Dobbie, W. and R. Fryer (2009) [Are High Quality Schools Enough to Close the Achievement Gap?](#) National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 15473

⁸ Bohlmark, A. and Lindahl, M. (2012) [Independent Schools and Long-Run Educational Outcomes: Evidence from Sweden's Large Scale Voucher Reform](#), IZA discussion paper 6683

characteristics as intermediate measures. As new schools, free schools face a number of significant challenges in their first few years. Even so Ofsted reports for the 24 free schools that opened in 2011 show that 75% have been rated good or outstanding under the new inspection regime.

As a new and rapidly expanding policy, much of the existing research to support the free schools programme is drawn from similar programmes in England (academies programme) or abroad (US charter schools: Swedish free schools). The evidence highlights the positive impact that an autonomous education system can have on educational standards. Evidence also shows that where choice exists, competitive pressures brought about by the creation of high-quality new schools can improve the quality of other schools in the local area. Our focus is now on how free schools, UTCs and studio schools can learn from best practice in strong academies and open free schools to ensure they have a positive and long term impact on educational standards in their local area. With free schools, UTCs and studio schools benefitting from even greater freedoms, we are also interested to understand how these new schools are making use of their freedoms and their relationship to innovation and performance.

Future priorities

Our research needs now are for evidence that will enable system leaders, head teachers, governors and free school trusts to make the best possible decisions and to maximise the benefits of free school status. We are keen to identify the models and examples of good practice and ‘what works’ in a free school, UTC or studio school setting and for those to be shared across the 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 free school 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.**

Some of the research questions identified in this paper link closely with the academies research priorities and questions paper and researchers may be interested in combining some of these areas.

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

Moving towards a self-improving, autonomous system

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

- How do free schools, UTCs and studio schools most effectively drive improvement for themselves and other local schools (regardless of their status), including by exercising system leadership, contribution to a wider system of self-improvement and through any ripple effect in the local area? What are the characteristics of the schools which do this most effectively?
- How are Free Schools, UTCs and studio Schools adding to the diversity of provision available to parents in a local area?

Specific types of free schools

- How can specialist 14-19 and 16-19 free schools, UTCs and studio schools ensure they are responding to specific demands of employers and universities?

- What effect has the opening of special free schools and alternative provision free schools had on pupil outcomes, interaction with other schools and diversity and viability of the specific market in the local area?⁹

Performance

With the recent introduction of free schools, UTCs and studio schools into the educational landscape, we want to know how strong performance in these schools is best achieved and what characterises those schools:

- What are the common characteristics of high performing free schools, UTCs and studio schools?
- How can free schools, UTCs and studio school trusts ensure strong performance in the first years of opening? What are the best free schools doing to ensure they have access to the right level of leadership, challenge and resource prior to reaching full capacity?
- Where do free schools, UTCs and studio schools go to obtain challenge? How do they use data effectively to identify failure before it occurs?

Innovation

With free schools, UTCs and studio schools benefitting 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. We also want to find out how the high level of autonomy and innovation in free schools, UTCs and studio schools is being used to develop new leaders in education.

- How are free schools, UTCs and studio schools most effectively using their freedoms to drive continuous improvement, accountability and exercise system leadership whilst also encouraging innovation?
- Are there any additional freedoms or accountability measures that would further drive improvement?
- How should innovation in the best free schools, UTCs and studio schools be shared with other schools to improve educational performance?
- What role are free schools, UTCs and studio schools playing in developing future leaders in education?

⁹ Special educational needs and disability and behaviour and exclusions will be addressed in separate papers available 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)



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