Accountability and governance

Research priorities and questions

April 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

Accountability and Governance: the policy context

Accountability matters – it is the mechanism by which central Government can ensure that schools and colleges provide high quality education for all children and, where educational standards fall short, swiftly and decisively intervene. We are building an accountability system which will enable all parties in the system – Government, governors, parents, teachers – to drive improved quality and performance.

We want to be challenging, fair and transparent, holding autonomous schools and colleges to account for the education they provide. This includes the need for high quality school governance – the front line of our accountability system

The Department aims to put in place an accountability system which drives both improved performance and demand for higher performance. Our vision is for an accountability system which is challenging, fair and transparent – one in which school level governance and national arrangements hold autonomous schools and colleges to account for the education they provide. We will reward schools, colleges and other providers that innovate, teach a broad and balanced curriculum, provide high-value qualifications, and achieve world-class standards in the achievement of their pupils. We will incentivise excellence, highlight under-performance so that swift action can be taken and minimise gaming behaviour. Data management and access to that information will be cutting-edge, efficient and transparent, allowing schools, academies (including chains) and colleges to self-assess, innovate and share information with their local communities, driving parental choice. The sum of these parts should be a renewed focus on driving up quality across the system.

To achieve this by 2015, our reforms will need to:
   a. ensure parents and carers, schools and the wider public get better information, which is clearly intelligible to all, and which enables governors to understand and carry out their role;
   b. articulate clear minimum standards which set out what good education looks like and enable intervention; and
   c. support (and challenge) a strong, sharply focused inspectorate which is respected and trusted across the system.

Better information

Information published by the Department, schools and FE colleges will be clear and easy to understand. Parents and carers will be able to use data to compare different providers and make choices about what is best for their child. On a more individual level, schools will provide parents and carers with information covering what their child should learn, what their progress is, and how they compare to their peers and national standards.

Schools will be able to compare and test themselves against statistical neighbours, and their self-reporting will improve across a range of areas: curriculum breadth, attainment measures, pupil premium spend and underlying data. Data which are published at primary, secondary and 16-19 will measure what counts; and attainment and progress measures, readiness for the next stage and destination measures. Clear minimum standards will mean that schools and colleges have clarity about what good looks like and can judge their own performance with rigour.

We will require all secondary schools to publish core information on their website, in a standard format. From 2016, there will be 4 key measures which must be published:

- pupils' progress across 8 subjects. So, a parent will see whether pupils at a school typically achieve 1 grade more than expected, or 1 grade less;
- the average grade a pupil achieves in these same 'best 8' subjects. This will show, for example, that pupils in a particular school average a high B grade or a low D grade in their GCSEs;
- the percentage of pupils achieving a C grade in English and maths; and,
- the proportion of pupils gaining the EBacc, which will continue in its current form.

Clear minimum standards

The Department will set out higher standards which focus on raising attainment (both overall and in relation to each child's progress), teaching a broad and balanced curriculum. The system will set ambitious and rising expectations in floor targets at Key Stage 2, 4 and 5, with a focus on essential building blocks, breadth, and progress and clear expectations on the achievement of disadvantaged pupils.

We will incentivise schools and other providers to meet these standards through a system which rewards the best with greater autonomy and trust – allowing head teachers and their teams to get on with doing what they do best. Conversely, where children are at risk of being failed through poor providers, central government will intervene swiftly – primarily through Ofsted. High-quality Ofsted inspection will challenge all schools and colleges to strive for excellence in achievement, leadership, teaching and behaviour (schools only).

We have proposed an important change to the way we measure underperformance and to our floor targets. Rather than the 5 A* to C GCSE threshold measure, we will use a new progress measure assessing progress and attainment in 8 subjects: English and maths, 3 further EBacc subjects, and 3 other high-value qualifications. This will encourage schools to offer all pupils a broad curriculum with a strong academic core with English and maths double weighted to reflect the importance of these subjects.

These changes will be fairer as they take account of a school's intake and the new floor standard will be defined as progress half a grade lower than reasonable expectations.

The new system will begin in 2016, though schools will be able to opt-in to the new system from 2015.

We have recently consulted on changes to both the primary and 16-19 accountability frameworks and expect to announce our approach in both these areas in spring 2014. Once these frameworks are agreed, research questions may flow from them.

A sharply focused inspectorate

Ofsted will continue to be a central pillar of the accountability system, identifying the best performers, challenging and incentivising others to do better and holding to account those who continue to underperform. Curriculum breadth as well as other progress measures such as pupil premium spend/impact, will be a fundamental component of the Ofsted inspection framework, performance tables and floor standards. There will be greater recognition of strong leaders who take on challenging schools. Ofsted will operate a more flexible approach to scheduling inspection visits to schools that have undergone significant structural change to their governance arrangements, e.g. failing schools that have become part of a multi-academy trust.

More professional standards of school governance[3]

High quality school governance plays a crucial role in creating robust school-level accountability. We need highly skilled and confident boards of governors, focused on holding school leaders to account for the educational and financial performance of their schools. As part of a wide ranging reform programme to improve the quality of school governance, we are:

- emphasising the importance of governing bodies as non-executive strategic leaders who need to focus heavily on their core strategic functions;
- giving boards of governors more flexibility in how they constitute and operate through less prescriptive regulations and model academy articles;
- investing more in training and development through the National College of Teaching and Leadership, expanding training for chairs, increasing peer-to-peer support through National Leaders of Governance, launching a new training programme for clerks, and developing specific training workshops for governors on key policy priorities; and,
- supporting governor recruitment by funding the School Governors One Stop Shop (SGOSS) to 2015 to engage employers in supporting their high quality staff to volunteer as governors.

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[3] Specific governance questions relating to academies are included in the Research Priorities and Questions: Academies paper.

Boards of governors at academy trusts have the same broad responsibilities as maintained school governors and act as company directors and charitable trustees. Academies can operate in a single academy trust, multi-academy trust, umbrella trust or collaborative partnership, each with different governance arrangements.

Research summary

The international evidence is clear on the relationship between autonomy and accountability: having accountability frameworks in place is important to gain optimum benefits from school autonomy. PISA[4] results continue to show that greater autonomy in decisions relating to curricula, assessments and resource allocation tend to be associated with higher levels of student attainment, particularly when schools operate within a culture of accountability[5].

OECD[6] identified three forms of accountability: performance accountability through examinations and assessment; regulatory accountability through inspections; and, market accountability that emphasises parent/carer choice[7]. Evidence shows that accountability mechanisms can help improve school performance and pupil attainment[8], whilst high-performing school systems' monitor performance through examinations and inspections, with the best using the results to identify best practice and ensure that lessons are transferred to other schools[9].

Performance data

Performance tables are a key accountability tool for schools and parents/carers, and there is strong evidence that the publication of school league tables is linked to school effectiveness[10]. Furthermore, evidence from the United States suggests that accountability measures are more effective where rewards or sanctions are attached to performance, in order to prompt schools to improve[11].

Whilst strong accountability systems have been shown to lead to higher achievement levels, school performance indicators are prone to strategic manipulation through practices which may be at odds with addressing the problem effectively and in the long

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[4] Programme for International Student Assessment

[5] OECD (2013) PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices. OECD Publishing;
OECD (2011). PISA in Focus 9, OECD Publishing

[6] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

[7] OECD (2013) PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices. OECD Publishing

[8] Muriel, A. and Smith, J. (2011). On Education Performance Measures, Fiscal Studies, 32:2

[9] Husbands, C., Shreeve, A., and Jones, N. (2008). Accountability and children's outcomes in high performing education systems, EPPI Centre, Institute of Education.

[10] Burgess, S., Wilson, D., and Worth, J., (2010). A natural experiment in school accountability: the impact of school performance information on pupil progress and sorting, CPMO Working Paper Series No. 10/241.

[11] Hanushek, E.A. and Raymond, M.E (2005) Does school accountability lead to improved student performance? Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 24,2,

term. Evidence suggests that schools may engage in 'gaming' behaviours such as a focus on borderline pupils at the expense of lower attainers[12] or teaching to the test[13]. The creation of perverse incentives can limit the effectiveness of accountability through school performance indicators and new research will be required to understand how schools behave under the new system.

The importance for parents/carers of knowing how well a school performs is clear[14], though the evidence on parents'/carers' use of performance tables is mixed. Previous studies have suggested that performance tables can increase socio-economic segregation across schools and reinforce disadvantage[15]. Further research is required to understand how the enhanced information provided to parents informs decisions and the role this plays in driving parental and student choice.

Inspection

Overall, the evidence suggests inspection has a positive effect on school performance, although a causal relationship is not always clearly evident[16] and some studies have identified a negative impact in the short term[17]. Recent and robust research, however, has shown that schools failing their Ofsted inspections improve GCSE performance in the years following inspection[18]. Crucially, this analysis suggests that these improvements are not the result of gaming behaviour by schools, such as the strategic manipulation of the subjects sat for exams, or focussed effort on the A*-C threshold. Other research has identified that the response of the institution to inspection is related to the: quality of inspection; quality of leadership; and the implications of the inspection for the funding, esteem or staff[19].

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[12] Burgess, S. Propper, C., Slater, H. and Wilson, D. (2005) Who Wins and Who Loses from School Accountability? The Distribution of Educational Gain in English Secondary Schools. Discussion paper no. 5248. Bristol: Centre for Economic Policy Research.

[13] Wiggins, A. (2002) Dysfunctional effects of league tables: a comparison between English and Scottish primary schools, Public Money and Management, 22:1.

[14] TNS (2008) School Accountability and School Report Card Omnibus Survey Top Line Findings, DCSF: RR107.

[15] Machin, S. and Vignoles, A. (2006) Education Policy in the UK, Centre for the Economics of Education: London School of Economics.

[16] Matthews, P., and Sammons, P. (2004) Improvement through inspection: an evaluation of the impact of Ofsted's work, Ofsted.

[17] Wolf, I. and Janssens, F. (2008) Effects and side effects of inspections and accountability in education: an overview of empirical studies. Oxford Review of Education, 33:33

[18] Allen, R. and Burgess, S (2012) How should we treat under-performing schools? A regression discontinuity analysis of school inspections in England. Centre for Market and Public Organisation, Working Paper No. 12/287.

[19] Matthews, P., and Sammons, P. (2004). Improvement through inspection: an evaluation of the impact of Ofsted's work, Ofsted.

Governance

Evidence indicates that an effective governing body can have an impact on school improvement, and that the lack of a capable governing body can be a substantial disadvantage[20]. Good governance is linked to higher standards, better pupil behaviour and good teaching and leadership[21], with some evidence suggesting a stronger link to attainment in primary schools[22].

Evidence has shown that in schools rated as outstanding, governors were significantly more likely to strongly agree that they felt clear about their roles and responsibilities[23]. Governors are most effective when they play a strategic role[24] and hold the headteacher and senior leadership team to account through appropriate support and challenge. Effective governing bodies have a number of features, including: productive relationships with the senior team; a good understanding of their role; an effective chair and clerk; and good knowledge of the school and its data, which should be monitored alongside the school targets. Improving governor recruitment and selection can enhance the performance of governing bodies, with persistently high levels of vacancies and high turnover resulting in governing bodies being less effective[25].

In academies, the two-tier governance structure of multi–academy trusts (MATs) can lead to sharper scrutiny of performance[26] (with a board of trustees accountable for the entire MAT and local governing bodies accountable for decisions delegated to school level). Evidence suggests that schools that become sponsored academies undergo substantial changes in governance, such as recruitment of governors with a greater range of skills and experience and governors playing a greater role in terms of support and challenge. Transformation to governance arrangements in converter academies has been less pronounced[27].

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[20] McCrone, T., Southcott, C., and George, N. (2011). Governance models in schools, Slough: NFER.

[21] Ofsted (2002). The work of school governors, Ofsted.

[22] James, C., Brammer, S., Conolly, M., Fertig, M., James, J. and Jones, J. (2010). The Hidden Givers: A Study of School Governing Bodies in England, Reading: CfBT.

[23] McCrone, T., Southcott, C., and George, N. (2011). Governance models in schools, Slough: NFER.

[24] DfES (2004). Governing the School of the Future. London:DfES; Ofsted (2011). School Governance: Learning from the best, Ofsted; McCrone, T., Southcott, C., and George, N. (2011). Governance models in schools, Slough: NFER.

[25] Balarin, M., Brammer, S., James, C.R. and McCormack, M. (2008). The School Governance Study. London: Business in the Community.

[26] Ofsted (2010). The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's services and Skills 2009/10. Ofsted.

[27] National College of Schools and Children's Services (2011). Academies: research into the leadership of sponsored and converting academies.

Future Priorities

Responding to the existing evidence, Government is embarking on significant policy changes to improve accountability and governance of schools. This provides an opportunity to study the impact of these changes – and thereby continue to develop the research base about how accountability and governance drive school improvement and, ultimately, pupil attainment. At the same time, there are opportunities for research to inform further policy development.

The research questions identified below are intended as broad prompts; they have been formulated to help identify the areas we are most interested in – whether research in these areas is undertaken by Government, in partnership with independent researchers, voluntary organisations or by schools and governors themselves.

These questions are intended to be reviewed at regular intervals, as gaps are addressed and new areas for investigation arise.

Better information, clear minimum standards and a focused inspectorate

As new performance measures are introduced, there is a unique opportunity to study how schools and colleges respond. The highest priority research questions for the Department in this area are:

- How might schools and 16-19 providers respond to the accountability reforms? To what extent are schools responding to the secondary reforms by adopting a broad and balanced curriculum and focusing on the attainment of all their pupils, or are schools responding to other incentives which encourage 'gaming'?
- What has been the impact of new floor standards on different schools, 16-19 providers and pupils/students?
- What has been the impact of broadening secondary school performance data to focus on 8 subjects?
- To what extent has providing new and more information to parents/carers made schools more accountable?
- As reception baselines develop, what are the characteristics of school-entry assessments that provide the best baseline for pupils' future attainment?

As we refine the system, we will continue to be interested in learning from experiences in other education systems and parallels in other public services:

- What particular accountability measures are most effective in high performing countries?

- What are the most effective approaches to school inspection to improve school and college performance in both the short and long term?
- What financial accountability mechanisms are used in countries with autonomous school systems? How effective are they at incentivising and ensuring schools are efficient in their use of resources to achieve educational outcomes?
- What can be learnt from inspection in other public sector accountability systems?

We are also interested in any research conducted on the following issues:

- Has the focus in inspections on schools' use of the pupil premium had an effect on narrowing the attainment gap?
- Is there a link between financial autonomy and school efficiency?
- How do the best schools and colleges use the available information to drive attainment? Which strategies are most successful in raising attainment?
- To what extent do parents/carers understand information on inspections, pupil attainment, progress, and comparisons with peers and national standards? How do parents use this information and does it influence their behaviour?
- How do prospective students and students use similar data in a 16-19 context?

Governance

There are now many types of governance structures, including standalone and federations of maintained schools, single academy trusts, sponsored academies, multi-academy trusts and umbrella trusts. We want to understand the factors that lead to the most robust governance arrangements and hence the most effective school-level accountability, particularly for education standards. The highest priority questions are:

- What is the most advantageous scale for school-level accountability? Are there benefits when governance is organised at a multi-school level?
- How in practice do the most effective governing bodies use target setting, data analysis and headteacher reporting to create robust accountability for school performance?
- What defines the boundary between the strategic role of the governing body and the headteachers' responsibility for the day to day operation and management of the school? How can governors avoid getting distracted from their core strategic functions?
- What limits the effectiveness of governing bodies? How can this be mitigated? Where governance has improved significantly, how has that been achieved?
- To what extent are governing bodies becoming more skilled, confident and focused on creating robust accountability for education standards?

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)