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The Secrets of Academies' Success

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The research

‘The academies programme is making a real difference to the life chances of young people with exam results improving at twice the national rate.’¹

Elizabeth Reid, Chief Executive Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, September 2009

‘[Ed Ball’s] said the overall performance of academies has been very positive with the vast majority reporting improved results in 2009. GCSE results are improving at over twice the national average.’

DCSF News Centre, September 2009²

‘Academies are working. For the 62 with results in both 2008 and 2009, provisional results show the increase in the number of pupils getting five A*-C grades including English and maths is twice the national average...’

Vernon Coaker, December 2009

Academies are designed to serve disproportionately deprived areas and on the whole their record seems to be impressive. The National Audit Office (NAO) reported in 2007, for example, that ‘GCSE performance is improving faster in Academies than in any other types of school, including those in similar circumstances’. The NAO therefore concluded that Academies ‘...are on track to deliver good value for money’. Although other research has questioned this assertion, the message on Academies continues to be strong. In June 2008 Education Secretary Ed Balls argued that Academies could ‘...break the link between poverty and attainment’.³

There are now 200 Academies in England, with a further 100 planned for the next academic year. The success of Academies, measured by the improvement made in their headline GCSE results, has been much extolled by both the Labour government and the Conservative Party. The question which the research for this report has sought to address is *why* are Academies’ exam results improving at ‘twice the national rate’: what are the secrets of their success?

Background

The Academies’ programme, a permutation of the Conservatives’ City Technology College, was established by Tony Blair and initially announced in 2000 while David Blunkett was education

¹ Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, Press Releases: ‘200th Academy Opens a Year Early’, <http://www.specialistschools.org.uk/article.aspa?PageId=1585&NodeId=37>

² Department for Children Schools and Families, New Centre, http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2009_0167

³ “‘No excuses’ on school results,’ *BBC News Online*, 10th June 2008

secretary. The overarching aim of the Academies' programme was to raise standards in inner-city areas, and thereby life chances.

Academies are government-funded schools, with two key differences granting them the status of 'independent state schools'. Firstly, Academies are established in partnership with a sponsor. Potentially, sponsors impact on aspects of the Academy ranging from expenditure on the school premises to the management and governance of the Academy. Secondly, Academies are granted freedoms which mainstream maintained schools (e.g. comprehensives) are not. These freedoms include exemption from local authority control, spending power which is not subject to national (or local authority) priorities, autonomy over policy on teachers' pay, the freedom to determine policy on exclusions and greater curricula flexibility.

The details of Academies' arrangements have altered over the last decade, particularly since Ed Balls' instatement as education secretary. Academies now have less autonomy than when the programme was first established. Under Balls, there have been two particularly significant changes. Firstly, the requirement that private sponsors put up a minimum initial £2 million has been ended with effect from September 2011. (For schools, universities and colleges becoming sponsors, the £2 million investment sum was waived in June 2007.) Balls' rationale for dropping the up-front cash requirement is to widen the pool of sponsors. Instead potential sponsors – who might be businesses, philanthropists, educational establishments, faith groups or parents – have to demonstrate that they have the necessary 'record' and expertise to run an Academy.⁴ The second major change, relates to new Academies' curricula freedoms. Freedoms for curricula 'innovation' have been reined in. Since September 2007, all funding agreements between the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) and Academies require Academies to follow the 'core' subjects of the National Curriculum. These core subjects are English, maths, science and ICT. (However, it is important to note that the introduction of science and ICT is no guarantee of 'academic' subjects, as *vocational* courses are available, and commonly used, in both subjects.)

The 'headline' figures

Much has been made by the government – as well as by the Conservative Party – of the rapid improvement in Academies' headline GCSE results as compared to in other maintained schools. Out of the 62 Academies which had GCSE results both this year and last year, for example, the

⁴ DCSF: Press notice, 7th September 2009, '200th Academy opens a year early as Ministers set out new plans to open up programme to new sponsors'

http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2009_0158

percentage of students achieving five or more A*-C GCSEs (and the all-important equivalent) with English and maths was over twice the rate of last year's national improvement.

Academies' exam performance success at GCSE has contributed significantly to both Labour and the Conservatives' commitment to a rapid roll-out of the programme. In light of this commitment it is important to be able to identify what it is about Academies which is generating these improved results. This is particularly so as the cost of establishing and running an Academy is considerably higher than that of a mainstream maintained school.⁵

To date, there has been insufficient investigation into *how* Academies are achieving these higher results. Instead, assumptions have been made about what is generating the higher exam performance of students in Academies. These assumptions have tended to focus on the impact of the greater freedoms given to Academies, the harnessing of outside expertise in the form of the sponsors and the impact on student and teacher morale of a new building. These are the assumptions of those in favour of Academies; critics, by contrast, are tending to assume that selection and exclusion are playing a significant role in Academies' performance.

A key question which arose during the research is whether indeed curricula freedoms are at the heart of Academies' rapidly improving GCSE results – but in a negative rather than positive way. Whilst the intention is that curricula freedoms allow for innovation and a greater responsiveness to students' – rather than Whitehall's – needs, previous research has raised concerns that 'greater flexibility' in relation to the curriculum may be resulting in Academies dropping academic subjects in favour of educationally weak but 'statistically strong' vocational courses because these courses carry high values in the league-tables.

Freed from Freedom of Information

The reality is that the public, and it would appear policymakers, are more or less in the dark about what Academies are actually *doing*. A central contributor to this is the fact that Academies are not subject to the transparency required by mainstream maintained schools. Unlike all other publicly funded schools, Academies are not currently subject to the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. Instead, a decision was made to treat them in the same way as independent schools. In practice this means that individual Academies are under no obligation to publicly disclose details about activities such as the number of students excluded from the school and the breakdown by subject of their national exam results. Significantly, Academies were not initially exempt from

⁵ National Audit Office, 'The Academies Programme', 2007
http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/0607/the_academies_programme.aspx

FOI – the ruling was reversed in 2005, ostensibly in response to a newspaper (*The Times Educational Supplement*) attempting to access Academies' subject results.⁶

In the case of exam performance this lack of expected transparency is profoundly significant.

A main consequence of Academies' exemption from FOI is that we do not know how they are achieving their results at GCSE level. That is, we do not know which subjects their headline A*-C percentages have been achieved in. As Academies are not required by law to produce an account of their GCSE and equivalent results broken down by subject, they cannot be demanded. There are currently no other routes to freely access this information. (Notably, Academies are not tending to make their data available of their own accord (e.g. via their website).) The legal requirement for schools to publish their exam results by subject in their prospectuses was dropped in 2005;⁷ even a direct parliamentary question tabled by Labour MP David Chaytor has failed to extract Academies' results by subject.⁸ Therefore the only results which are made available for Academies are their figures for the numbers of students achieving five or more A*-C GCSEs and equivalent, and five or more A*-C GCSEs including maths and English. We do not know from these headline figures which subjects, and indeed which type of qualifications, students in Academies are doing well in. Equally, we do not know which subjects and qualifications students in Academies are *not* doing well in – or indeed are not doing at all. In the league tables, non-GCSEs are unidentifiable, their presence acknowledged only by the word 'equivalent' or just a small asterisk next to 'GCSE' denoting 'or the equivalent'. For this reason, in the case of the five or more A*-C headline figure we do not even know whether any GCSEs are denoted at all.

In recognition of Academies' anomalous lack of transparency, their exemption from FOI is currently under review. Following a consultation by the Ministry of Justice, it is thought that Academies will very likely be made subject to FOI as a Section 5 order – an effective amendment. However, even if Academies *are* made subject to FOI, there will still be a considerable time lapse⁹ before Academies' results are available for public scrutiny. In the meantime, the Academy programme will be blithely expanded.

In an era of hyper-accountability, where schools' 'data' in the form of test and exam results, is of paramount importance to the government, it is implausible that Academies' results by subject are of no consequence. A major concern therefore is why the government is either not interested in

⁶ Titcombe, R., 'How Academies Threaten the Comprehensive Curriculum', Forum, Volume 50, November 1, 2008

⁷ Titcombe, R., 'How Academies Threaten the Comprehensive Curriculum', Forum, Volume 50, November 1, 2008

⁸ Titcombe, R., 2008

⁹ Ministry of Justice enquiry by telephone, November 2009

how Academies are achieving their results, or is not keen to uncover their practices. It is also misguided that the Conservatives, in turn, are cavalierly adopting the current Academy model apparently without this level of information on the one hand, yet a vocational qualification ‘hit-list’ and academic blue-print on the other.

Mind the gap?

From Academies’ headline figures, the case for transparency is reinforced by a noticeable difference between their data and that of maintained mainstream schools (publicly-funded non-Academies). There is a bigger divergence – or ‘gap’ – in Academies between the percentage of students who have achieved five or more A*-C GCSEs and equivalent without English and maths and the percentage who have achieved five or more A*-C GCSEs and equivalent *with* English and maths, than there is in maintained mainstream schools.

Academies vs. Maintained Mainstream Schools: 2007/08 (revised/final) (end of KS4)¹⁰

All Academies with GCSE and equivalent results in 2008	5+ A*-Cs	5+A*-Cs including English and maths	Percentage point gap
	60.4	35.6	24.8

The tables below illustrate that the disparity between the figures for 5+A*-Cs with and without English and maths is considerably higher for Academies than for other maintained schools:

All Maintained Schools with GCSE and equivalent results in 2008	5+ A*-Cs	5+A*-Cs including English and maths	Percentage point gap
	65.3	47.6	17.7

¹⁰ DCSF: The 2008 Secondary School (Key Stage 4, GCSE and equivalents) Achievement and Attainment Tables, January 2008, <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/PER/p000830/index.shtml>

All Community Schools with GCSE and equivalent results in 2008	5+ A*-Cs	5+A*-Cs including English and maths	Percentage point gap
	62.0	44.8	17.2

All Voluntary Aided Schools with GCSE and equivalent results in 2008	5+A*-Cs	5+A*-Cs including English and maths	Percentage point gap
	73.4	58.4	15.0

All Voluntary Controlled Schools with GCSE and equivalent results in 2008	5+A*-Cs	5+A*-Cs including English and maths	Percentage point gap
	67.3	54.4	12.9

All Foundation Schools with GCSE and equivalent results in 2008	5+A*-Cs	5+A*-Cs including English and maths	Percentage point gap
	69.2	54.2	15.0

All City Technology Colleges with GCSE and equivalent results in 2008	5+A*-Cs	5+A*-Cs including English and maths	Percentage point gap
	95.8	76.4	19.4

This gap could be very significant. A disparity in the percentage point gap for the headline figure between mainstream maintained schools and Academies is mirrored in figures which compare students on free school meals (a useful, albeit imperfect, measure of deprivation) with students from more affluent backgrounds:

Rising gap between 5+A*-C GCSEs and equivalent without and with English and maths: 2007¹¹ (latest available)

Socio-economic class	5+ A*-Cs	5+ A*-Cs including English and maths	Percentage point gap
1 Wealthy	76.4	65.1	11.3
2 Urban Prosperity	61.2	49.2	12.0
3 Comfortably Off	64.0	50.0	14.0
4 Moderate Means	51.8	36.3	15.5
5 Hard Pressed	41.3	25.7	15.6

Previous research has indicated that young people from less affluent backgrounds are less likely to achieve high scores in both primary and secondary school tests. Past research also shows a strong relationship between underperformance in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 and entry into vocational alternatives to GCSEs.¹² Therefore, the wider gap between the 5+A*C GCSE with and without English and maths figures could be potentially linked to the presence of vocational qualifications. Together with the patterns seen in relation to free school meals, analysis by former head teacher Roger Titcombe (see below) suggests that a wider gap between the two headline figures is attributable to a low presence of GCSEs and a high proportion of vocational alternatives to GCSEs. A background on the situation is necessary.

¹¹ DCSF: National Curriculum Assessment, GCSE and Equivalent Attainment and Post-16 Attainment by ACORN category¹ of Pupil Residence 2007. (Provisional)
<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000759/index.shtml>

¹² See *Improvement – or the Equivalent*, de Waal, A., Civitas, August 2008

Much controversy was caused when a number of investigations¹³ revealed that GCSE performance in the league tables was being ‘bolstered’ with the use of vocational qualifications.

In a purported bid to create ‘parity of esteem’ between vocational and academic subjects, GCSEs and vocational qualifications are grouped together in the league tables. Vocational options, which can carry a high tariff, are indistinguishable in the main league tables. Although it has now been withdrawn, the ‘use’ of the GNVQ by schools, provides a pertinent illustration.

In 2007 Roger Titcombe and statistician Roger Davies, in collaboration with the *Times Educational Supplement’s* Warwick Mansell, compared GNVQs with GCSEs on two measures: the teaching time taken up and their relative difficulty. The decision to make an intermediate GNVQ, the most commonly taken level at GCSE, worth four GCSEs was, Mansell argues that they take four times as long to teach. Mansell et al.’s survey of the top 100 most improved schools in 2005, however, found that a GNVQ should instead have been worth 1.2 GCSEs, based on teaching time. Mansell also found there to be a discrepancy in the relative difficulties of GCSEs and GNVQs. In 2006, the GNVQ pass rates (C grade or above) in the two GNVQs the researchers found to be most popular, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and science, were 80 per cent and 86 per cent respectively. This compared to the 62 per cent A*-C rate for all GCSEs. Mansell et al.’s research found that the most popular GNVQ was in ICT. The details of their research revealed why.

The intermediate GNVQ ICT course came in six modules (or units). Only two of these units were assessed by exam and the other four were assessed by coursework. In 2006, for both coursework and exams, only 45 per cent was needed to gain a pass (in the GNVQs offered by the largest provider examining board, AQA). Furthermore, students were allowed to take as many re-sits as they liked, and not all modules had to be passed to gain the overall GNVQ. Therefore, thanks to the equivalence system, many schools were using the GNVQ in ICT to bolster their A*-C GCSE performance in the league tables. Indeed Mansell found that out of the top ten ‘most improved’ schools in England six of them ‘...admitted that their gains would have been significantly lower had GNVQs been excluded...’¹⁴ By getting all its pupils to take ICT GNVQ, the eighth most improved school in the country, Croxteth Community Comprehensive in Liverpool, for example, managed to more than double its percentage of students with good grades, from 20 per cent in 2002 to 47 per cent in 2003.¹⁵

¹³ Smithers: Do school exams need reforming? Alan Smithers, Centre for Education and Employment Research, University of Buckingham, September 2005; Mansell, W., *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, Politicos, London, 2007

¹⁴ Mansell, W., *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, Politicos, London, 2007, p118

¹⁵ Mansell, W., *Education by Numbers: The Tyranny of Testing*, 2007

In 2007 the GNVQ was withdrawn and therefore it ceased to be an option for boosting GCSE league table performance. A range of ‘successor’ qualifications as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (now QCDA) has referred to them, have replaced the GNVQ and there also exist many other so-called vocational or more accurately, ‘vocationally related’ qualifications. Why vocationally related? Because, as the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) has stated: ‘...these qualifications focus on learning *about* the working world, rather than learning about a specific job’ (emphasis added).¹⁶ The basic problem is that these qualifications on offer for 14-16 year-olds are neither vocational nor academic; rather they are both pseudo-vocational and pseudo-academic.

‘They [OCR Nationals] do not certificate competence on the job but are work-related qualifications which will support progression to an NVQ once a candidate is in the workplace.’

OCR¹⁷

Although vocational skills are sold as more hands-on,¹⁸ in reality the vocational courses offered at *this* level (it is important to emphasise that this does not necessarily apply across the board) are strikingly *non*-hands on. In this respect, learning is often much less applied than is the case with GCSEs. This raises the question of whether it is useful to be learning how to be, for example, an air steward at 14 (in OCR’s level 2 National Certificate in Travel and Tourism, in the unit ‘Working as Airline Cabin Crew’ pupils learn about the key responsibilities which cabin crew have). Certainly questionable however is taking up a 14-16 curriculum learning *about* the skills required to be an air steward.

Learning elementary construction skills is arguably more valuable than learning something under the umbrella of ‘tourism skills’; learning *about* the skills required in construction, when under 16 year-olds are not allowed to do any work on a building site, is however of doubtful value.

Returning to OCR’s level 2 National Certificate in Travel and Tourism, which is potentially the equivalent of doing four GCSEs, details are given about an example unit in the course brochure:

‘Unit highlights: OCR Nationals in Travel and Tourism, Level 2: Unit 6 – Investigating Package Holidays (Tour Operations). Examining the role of the tour operator and how package holidays are developed. Students develop their practical skills in presenting a simple welcome party for a resort.’¹⁹

¹⁶ QIA from Vocational Learning Support Programme

¹⁷ OCR website: OCR Nationals ICT Level 2 information

¹⁸ Directgov, ‘Education and Learning: Applied GCSEs’

¹⁹ OCR brochure: ‘Leisure and Tourism, Level 1; Travel and Tourism Levels 2 and 3’

Aside from the peculiarity of the idea that a particular section of 14 year-olds have more or less determined their careers at such a young age – ‘OCR has developed a suite of stimulating, vocation-based qualifications for those who want to pursue a career in leisure, travel and tourism industries’²⁰ – it would seem that a preferable area of study at school for a future tour rep, for example, would be a language or geography, rather than taking a course on what they will eventually learn to do themselves if they do indeed decide to work in the airline industry. (For further discussion on the nature and value of vocational qualifications currently on offer for 14-16 year-olds, see *School Improvement – or the ‘Equivalent’*.)²¹

Research on Academies and ‘equivalence’

In 2008 Roger Titcombe turned his attention to the 2007 GCSE results of Academies. The first observation he made was that, of the 40 Academies entering students for GCSE exams in 2007, 26 failed to achieve the government’s target of 30 per cent of pupils achieving five or more A*-Cs passes including English and maths. However, the figures for five or more good (A*-C grades) GCSEs without English and maths he found to be much better. For example, Marlowe Academy in Kent achieved a respectable 39 per cent 5+A*-C figure overall, but only 7 per cent achieved this figure when English and maths were included. For Barnsley Academy the comparative figures were 62 per cent and 20 per cent, and for Greig Academy in Haringey, 64 per cent and 21 per cent.²²

In order to investigate what underlay this disparity, Titcombe wanted to see the breakdown of the results by subject. This was thwarted by the fact that subject results were no longer required to be included in annual school prospectuses, neither were they available from the Department for Children, Schools and Families’ school performance tables – and the Freedom of Information Act could not be used to obtain the results. Titcombe himself found that when approached Academies were extremely reluctant to reveal the breakdown of their GCSE entries by subject; when he resorted to requesting the information from the Departments for Children, Schools and Families, they said that the department did not hold this information.²³

Eventually, Titcombe hit on the idea of using Ofsted’s ‘RAISEonline’ system, an internet performance database accessible to local authorities and schools which Titcombe managed to access by repeated invocation of the Freedom of Information Act. This revealed that at Marlowe

²⁰ OCR brochure: ‘Leisure and Tourism, Level 1; Travel and Tourism Levels 2 and 3’

²¹ de Waal, A., *Improvement – or the Equivalent*, Civitas, August 2008

²² Titcombe, R., Unpublished article, June 2008

²³ Titcombe, R., Unpublished article, June 2008

Academy, just 7 per cent of its students obtained an A*-C in Double Award science, and none at all in history or geography, with a very small number in European languages. At Barnsley Academy, no GCSE courses were provided in these subjects, and at Greig Academy no students obtained an A*-C in Double Award science, history or geography and a very small but indeterminate number, in European languages. Titcombe's motivation for looking at whether Academies are moving away from GCSEs was a concern about the diminishing of the academic curriculum.²⁴ As the Ofsted 'RAISEonline' system only provides data on GCSEs, Titcombe was not able to find out which non-GCSEs – vocational alternatives – were replacing the mainstream academic GCSE subjects.

To conclude, courses which lack both a sufficiently practical element and a sufficiently stimulating academic element are of limited benefit for students. Yet, these subjects of highly questionable value can be 'worth' four A*-C GCSEs in the league tables. Academies are under intense political pressure to succeed, with success hinging heavily on their headline GCSE results (Kate Pretsell, a teacher at Haberdashers' Aske's Knights' Academy, provides a pertinent illustration in her case study, p.52). The question is whether this pressure on Academies, together with their greater freedoms, is leading them to opt for subjects of little value to their students.

²⁴ Titcombe, R. *How Academies Threaten the Comprehensive Curriculum*, Forum: Volume 50, Number 1, 2008

Research strategy

Research focus

The aim of this research was to find out more about ‘why Academies are succeeding’, within the parameters of the government’s definition of success: headline GCSE and equivalent results. With this purpose, the views of Academy principals have been surveyed via emailed questionnaires. Ultimately, the survey has sought to find out a) what Academy principals consider to be the factors contributing to their progress, b) their willingness to publish their GCSE and equivalent results broken down by subject and entries, and c) whether Academy principals are prepared to actually release their latest GCSE and equivalent results, broken down by subject. The surveying was carried out between September and December 2009.

Supplementary research for this report has included two in-depth interviews with Academy principals, a case study by a practising teacher in her second year at an Academy, Haberdashers’ Aske’s Knights Academy, a case study of a student at the Harris Academy Purley, and the views of education campaigner and Academy critic, Fiona Millar.

The survey: Methodology

Scoping and pilot

Following a piloting stage, two decisions were made in relation to the final surveying strategy: firstly to use emailed questionnaires for the survey, and secondly to target Academy principals. In spite of the fact that posted and emailed questionnaires typically elicit comparatively low response rates,²⁵ the rationale behind surveying via email was that it appeared to be more likely to yield responses, as it could be done at the respondents’ convenience. Reaching the Academy principal on the telephone was found to be very challenging during the piloting stage. Also in the interests of maximising responses, the decision was taken to make the questionnaire, as far as possible, multiple-choice, as well as as short as possible. The reason Academy principals were targeted, in turn, was because it became clear from the piloting stage that less senior members of staff would not have the authority to release the Academy’s results. In addition the view was that Academy principals would be in a good position to give an overview on the activities of their Academies.

²⁵ Judd, C.M., Smith, E.R., Kidder, L.H., ‘Questionnaires and Interviews: Asking Questions Effectively’, *Research Methods in Social Relations*, Harcourt Brace 1991

Population

There are 200 Academies now open across England. The first cohort opened in 2002, the latest in September 2009.

Overall, the targeted group were Academies which, according to the DCSF, had been open for at least one year, and therefore in the majority of cases had achieved at least one set of GCSE and equivalent results. As such, Academies which opened in September 2009 were not included.

The target population was split to allow for two waves: a large 'core' sample of all Academies which opened *before* September 2008, and a smaller subsidiary sample of Academies which opened in September 2008. The primary aim of the second wave was to maximise the number of Academies approached on the question of releasing their GCSE and equivalent results.

In both waves, the final samples discounted Academies which had either no permanent principal or the same principal as another Academy in the sample, and those Academies which participated in the pilot. The final sample size was 80 for the first wave and 38 for the second wave. The overall sample population, therefore, was 118 principals.

Surveying technique

Principals were contacted via their personal assistants (PAs) or an equivalent member of administrative staff. An initial telephone call was made explaining the purpose of the research, how long the questionnaire would take and what would happen to the information gathered through the survey (including an assurance that any responses/data would be kept strictly anonymous). The PA/equivalent, or in a minority of cases the principal's own email address was then taken and the questionnaire sent over. In each case, it was subsequently ensured that principals had seen the invitation to participate in the survey and the questionnaire (to ensure a non-response was not down to them being unaware of the request for participation).

As mentioned above, the questionnaires were sent out in two waves: the first 'core' wave, followed by the second subsidiary wave. There were two variations between the questionnaires sent out in the first and second wave. In the first wave, a single set of questions was sent out, asking principals for their views on the progress of their Academy. Towards the end of the questionnaire, principals were asked whether 1) they thought that Academies should be required to publish a breakdown of their GCSE and equivalent results by subject and 2) whether they would be prepared to release their latest available GCSE and equivalent results to Civitas 'as background information for this research' (again an assurance of strict anonymity was given). For the second question, principals were given the option of either including their latest available results as an attachment or selecting 'Please contact my PA for the results'. This latter option was given in order to facilitate the process for principals, and ensure that a refusal to release results was not on the basis of it being an inconvenience or due to lack of time.

The divergence in the second wave relates to the questions regarding principals' views on their GCSE and equivalent results. As such, the questions from the first wave were split into two parts, constituting two sets of questions. Unlike in wave 1, respondents were first asked about their views on whether Academies should release their results, and then secondly about their general views on the progress of their Academy. Respondents were able to respond to the first questionnaire in isolation, with the option of continuing on to the second part, if they wished.

The purpose behind the re-structuring of the questions in the second wave was specifically to maximise the number of respondents regarding the questions on results.

A further difference was that principals were not asked directly whether they would be willing to release their latest available GCSE and equivalent results broken down by subject to Civitas (as they were in the first wave). Instead respondents were asked whether they would be willing to release their results if they were asked for them. Those principals who stated that they would be willing to release their results if asked were re-contacted by email and their latest available results requested. The rationale for this variation in relation to results was to mitigate for the fact that, without pre-emptive questions, a direct request for results might lack sufficient context and therefore might have biased the question towards refusal.

In wave 2, each participant completed the entire questionnaire, thereby covering all of the questions answered by principals who participated in the first wave. Therefore the results of both waves have been amalgamated. For the one question which differs between the two waves, the responses have also be presented separated.

Response rate

It was very clear, speaking to Academy staff during the piloting stage, that Academies receive a great number of requests for information, and in particular to participate in surveys. For this reason, together with the fact that principals' schedules are very full, a highly targeted approach was necessary to yield responses. As far as was possible, the research sought to ensure that principals who did not participate in the research did not *wish* to – as opposed to not having had adequate opportunity to. As such, the questionnaires were designed to be as quick to complete as possible. In a further attempt to facilitate responses principals were given the option of completing the questionnaire over the telephone at a convenient time. Attempts to elicit responses also involved making the period within which principals were asked to respond to the survey lengthy; sending frequent reminders and making frequent follow-up calls; and offering extensions on the 'deadline' to accommodate principals' schedules.

Ultimately, a definitive response was sought, be it in the form of a completed questionnaire or in the form of a refusal to participate in the survey. By the final week of the research all but 15 of the first wave of respondents had replied, either in the form of a completed questionnaire or a refusal, and all but one of the second wave. For both waves, a final email was sent to the

remaining Academies giving them another week and stating that failure to reply would be recorded as a refusal to participate unless otherwise instructed.

A high level of persistence and contact was required in order to elicit responses from the Academy principals. Academy administrative staff, generally the principal's PA, were extremely helpful and co-operative and patient in light of the frequent contact made with them. It is also important to add that several Academy principals were also very co-operative.

Final response rate

From the first wave, the response rate was 41 per cent: out of a final selected sample of 80 principals, 33 participated in the survey. The response rate for the second wave of the survey was 18 per cent: out of a sample of 38 principals, seven participated.

The overall response rate was 34 per cent: out of a total combined sample of 118 principals, 40 participated in the survey.

Of those principals in wave one who did not complete the questionnaire, 35 responded (either via their PA/equivalent or in person) to say that they would not be participating in the survey. Out of wave 2, 30 principals responded (again, either via their PA/equivalent or in person) to say that they would not be completing the questionnaire. In total, 13 principals did not send what might be termed an 'active' refusal – that is, they failed to respond at all. The significance of the other 'active' refusals is that they indicate that in the majority of cases it can be confidently asserted that a non-response was *not* on the grounds that the Academy principal was unaware of the survey.

With respect to the two waves, the notable divergence in responses was the comparatively low-response from the second wave, together with a lower rate of result submission. In light of the fact that the second wave gave principals the opportunity to complete a much quicker questionnaire, it seems likely that a low response was down to principals not wishing to participate. Being asked about their views on the contentious issue of GCSE and equivalent results at the beginning of the questionnaire may have deterred some principals. This assertion, can of course only be speculative.

Academies which submitted their results

As mentioned, one of the key purposes of the research was to find out whether Academies were prepared to release their GCSE and equivalent results, broken down by subject. Out of those Academies which completed a questionnaire, 16 released their results, 21 refused to do so (3 did not yet have any results).

Results overview

Wave 1

Completed questionnaires	33
Released results	14
Refusals	47

Wave 2

Completed questionnaires	7
Released results	2
Refusals	31

Achieved sample: participating Academies

North West 4

East Midlands 7

London 11

Yorkshire and the Humber 6

West Midlands 3

South West 5

South East 4

Survey findings

Overview

Survey responses

- **88 per cent** of Academy principals surveyed think that their Academy is progressing either very well or well
- **55 per cent** of principals think that Academies' results, broken down by subject, should be made publicly available
- Only **43 per cent** of Academy principals agreed to release their results
- Nevertheless the most commonly chosen indicator of progress overall is exam results, chosen by **80 per cent** of Academy principals surveyed
- Notably, the most commonly chosen overall beneficiary of the freedoms Academies have is in relation to the curriculum, chosen by **67 per cent** of principals
- **70 per cent** of respondents do not think that the same progress as their Academy has made could be made in a mainstream maintained school
- The most commonly chosen overall contributor to progress is leadership, chosen by **80 per cent** of principals

Detailed findings: Survey responses²⁶ (combined waves)²⁷

Length of leadership

Total responses: 40

<1 year	5	13%
1-<2 years	15	38%
2-<3 years	6	15%
3< years	14	35%

The majority, 38 per cent, of surveyed principals have been leading their current Academy for between one and two years. 51 per cent of principals had been leading their current Academy for under two years and 50 per cent for two years or more.

Principals' views on how their Academy is progressing

Total responses: 40

Very well	26	65%
Well	9	23%
Fairly well	2	5%
As well as can be expected in the circumstances	3	8%
Not as well as it should be	-	-
Other	-	-
Don't know	-	-

The vast majority of principals are either very positive or positive about the progress of their Academy: 88 per cent think that the Academy they are leading is either progressing very well or well. No respondent is of the view that their Academy is not making progress.

²⁶ Percentages have been rounded-up to the nearest whole number

²⁷ Responses presented separately in the case where the question was asked differently (relating to release of results)

Basis on which principals are judging their Academies

Totals: Main reason (1): 40; second most important reason (2): 40; third most important reason (3): 39

Respondents were able to choose up to **three** main reasons, which they were asked to **rank** in order of importance from one to three

Student motivation	1 (<i>most important</i>)	18	45%
	2 (<i>second most important</i>)	8	20%
	3 (<i>third most important</i>)	4	10%
Student attendance	1	2	5%
	2	8	20%
	3	2	5%
Staff retention	1	-	-
	2	2	5%
	3	5	13%
Staff motivation	1	3	8%
	2	5	13%
	3	5	13%
Exam results	1	11	28%
	2	9	23%
	3	12	31%
Popularity of the school (e.g. oversubscribed)	1	4	10%
	2	5	13%

	3	4	10%
Ofsted inspection report	1	2	5%
	2	2	5%
	3	6	15%
Other	1	-	-
	2	1	3%
	3	1	3%
Don't know	1	-	-
	2	-	-
	3	-	-

In view of the fact that each of the Academy principals feel that their Academy is making progress (though to varying degrees) the principals can be taken to be judging their Academies as successes. The most popular **main** indicator of success chosen by principals is student motivation, chosen by 45 per cent. (The second most popular main indicator of success is exam results, chosen by 28 per cent.) Exam results are also the second most popular **second** most important indicator. The most popular reason chosen as the **third** main indicator is again exam results, chosen by 31 per cent.

The most popular indicator of the state of the Academy **overall** is exam results, chosen by 80 per cent of respondents (i.e. has been chosen by 32 respondents as a main (ranked 1-3) indicator).

Main contributory factors to progress

Totals: Main reason (1): 40; second most important reason (2): 40; third most important reason (3): 39

Leadership	1	29	73%
	2	3	8%
	3	-	-
Management team in general	1	1	3%
	2	10	25%
	3	3	8%
Teaching staff	1	3	8%
	2	12	30%
	3	7	18%
Curriculum	1	3	8%
	2	8	20%
	3	9	23%
Resources	1	-	-
	2	1	3%
	3	2	5%
Additional funding	1	3	8%
	2	-	-
	3	4	10%
Additional freedoms	1	-	-
	2	3	8%
	3	5	13%

Direct sponsor input	1	-	-
	2	2	5%
	3	2	6%
Behaviour and discipline policies	1	-	-
	2	-	-
	3	6	15%
Other	1	1	3%
	2	1	3%
	3	1	3%
Don't know	-	-	-

The most popular **main** factor contributing to progress is leadership, chosen by a clear majority of 73 per cent. The second most popular main contributors to progress lag a long way behind, chosen by 8 per cent and tied between teaching staff, curriculum and additional funding. The most commonly chosen **second** most important contributor to progress is teaching staff, chosen by 34 per cent. The most commonly chosen **third** most important contributor to progress is the curriculum, chosen by 27 per cent.

Overall, the most commonly chosen contributory factor to progress is leadership, chosen by 80 per cent of respondents.

Main areas which additional funding is seen have positively impacted on

Totals: Main reason (1): 40; second most important reason (2): 35; third most important reason (3): 35

The building	1	12	30%
	2	6	17%
	3	3	9%
Facilities (e.g. library, ICT suites, sports facilities)	1	11	28%
	2	6	17%
	3	2	6%
Senior management team staff	1	4	10%
	2	2	6%
	3	3	9%
Teaching staff salaries	1	2	5%
	2	2	6%
	3	1	3%
Staff training	1	2	5%
	2	2	6%
	3	7	21%
Smaller classes	1	3	8%
	2	9	26%
	3	3	9%
Support staff	1	2	5%
	2	4	11%
	3	4	12%
Equipment	1	-	-

	2	3	9%
	3	10	30%
Other	1	1	3%
	2	1	3%
	3	2	6%
None	1	2	5%
	2	-	-
	3	-	-
Don't know	1	1	3%
	2	-	-
	3	-	-

The most commonly chosen **main** factor which additional funding granted to Academies has impacted on is the building, chosen by 30 per cent, closely followed by facilities (28 per cent). The most popular **second** most important impact is smaller classes, chosen by 26 per cent. The most popular **third** most important impact is on equipment, chosen by 30 per cent.

Overall, the most commonly chosen positive impact of additional money has been on the building, chosen by 53 per cent of respondents.

Main areas which additional freedoms have positively impacted on

Totals: Main reason (1): 39; second most important reason (2): 35; third most important reason (3): 29

Curriculum	1	15	39%
	2	4	11%
	3	7	24%
Hiring	1	5	13%
	2	1	3%
	3	1	3%
Dismissal	1	-	-
	2	1	3%
	3	-	-
Pay	1	-	-
	2	3	9%
	3	1	3%
Spending arrangements/priorities	1	-	-
	2	10	29%
	3	5	17%
Training	1	-	-
	2	2	6%
	3	4	14%
Management priorities/decision-making	1	11	28%
	2	7	20%
	3	6	21%
Disciplinary policy	1	-	-

	2	2	6%
	3	3	10%
Reduced bureaucracy	1	6	15%
	2	4	11%
	3	6	21%
Other	1	-	-
	2	1	3%
	3	-	-
None	1	2	5%
	2	-	-
	3	-	-
Don't know	1	-	-
	2	-	-
	3	-	-

The most popular **main** factor considered to have been positively affected by additional freedoms is the curriculum, chosen by 39 per cent. The second most popular main factor affected by additional freedoms is management decisions/priorities, chosen by 28 per cent. The most commonly chosen second most important area which has been positively impacted on by additional freedoms is spending arrangements/priorities, chosen by 29 per cent. The most popular **third** most important area is freedoms relating to curriculum, chosen by 24 per cent.

Overall, the most commonly chosen positive which the additional freedoms granted to Academies are having is on the curriculum, chosen by 67 per cent. Notably, two respondents stated that they do not feel additional freedoms granted to Academies have had a positive impact.

Main areas which sponsors have positively impacted on

Totals: Main reason (1): 40; second most important reason (2): 36; third most important reason (3): 28

Ethos	1	26	65%
	2	3	8%
	3	3	11%
Facilities	1	3	8%
	2	10	28%
	3	3	11%
Funding	1	2	5%
	2	6	17%
	3	-	-
Management	1	2	5%
	2	5	14%
	3	6	21%
Bringing in outside expertise	1	5	13%
	2	9	25%
	3	12	43%
Other	1	1	3%
	2	2	6%
	3	3	11%
None	1	-	-
	2	-	-
	3	1	4%

Don't know	1	1	3%
	2	1	3%
	3	-	-

The most popular **main** area which Academy sponsors are seen to have impacted on is ethos, chosen by 65 per cent. The second most popular main impact of the sponsors is seen to be bringing in outside expertise, chosen by 13 per cent. The most popular **second** most important area impacted on by sponsors is facilities, chosen by 28 per cent, and the most popular **third** most important area is bringing in outside expertise, chosen by 43 per cent.

Overall, the most commonly chosen area which sponsors are seen to have an impact on is ethos, chosen by 80 per cent. Notably 12 respondents (30 per cent) did not select a third element which the sponsor had had a positive impact on, and 10 per cent did not select a second impact.

Approximate percentage of teaching staff moved from the school which the Academy replaced

Total: 40

100%	12	30%
75%	8	20%
50%	8	20%
25%	2	5%
Less than 25%	4	10%
None/Not applicable	2	5%
Don't know	4	10%

Over two-thirds of Academies surveyed, 70 percent, have seen a transfer of 50 per cent or more teachers from the school which the Academy replaced. 50 per cent, of Academies have seen 75 per cent or more staff transfer from the replacement school.

View on whether breakdown of Academy GCSE and equivalent results should be made publicly available

Total: 40

Yes	22	55%
No	11	28%
Don't know	7	18%

Just over half of respondents, 55 per cent, think that Academies' GCSE and equivalent results, broken down by subject, should be made publicly available. Over a quarter, 28 per cent, think that they should not, whilst 18 per cent don't know.

Whether principals were prepared to release their latest available GCSE and equivalent results, by subject: Overall

Total: 40

i. *Overall final response*

Yes	16	40%
No	21	53%
No results yet	3	8%

ii. *Overall final response of those Academies with results*

Yes	16	43%
No	21	57%

iii. *Breakdown of responses*

Yes	16	40%
No	16	40%
No results yet	3	8%
Yes – but did not provide results	4	10%
Other	-	-
Don't know	1	3%

Whether principals were prepared to release their latest available GCSE and equivalent results, by subject: By wave

A. Broken down by wave: Wave 1

(Total: 33)

Yes	15	45%
No	14	42%
No results yet	2	6%
Yes – but did not provide results	2	6%
Other	-	-
Don't know	-	-

B. Broken down by wave: Wave 2

(Total: 7)

Yes	1	14%
No	2	29%
No results yet	1	14%
Yes – but did not provide results	3	43%
Other	-	-
Don't know	-	-

Out of those Academies with at least one set of GCSE and equivalent results, 57 per cent were not willing to release them broken down by subject.

View on whether similar progress could be made in a mainstream maintained school today

Total: 40

Yes	10	25%
No	28	70%
Don't know	2	5%

The vast majority of respondents, 70 per cent, do not think it would be possible to make the same progress in a mainstream maintained school today as in an Academy. A quarter in turn, do think it would be possible, and 5 per cent do not know.

Findings 2: Submitted GCSE and equivalent results analysis

Results and reticence

Ultimately, without knowing the breakdowns of the headline GCSE figures by subject it is impossible to confidently say whether there is a widespread ‘problem’ or not in relation to the subjects which Academies are doing well in. It is therefore equally impossible to say whether the Academy model is *truly* ‘successful’ or not. The likelihood is that there are exemplary Academies with excellent curricula which are succeeding in the league tables on the basis of good teaching and good organisation. From the evidence gathered to date, it is also clear that there are Academies which dazzle in the league tables but do not offer a solid academic education. At the moment however, it is impossible to know which scenario is more prevalent. This evidence deficit is in itself a fundamental flaw of the programme.

The Academies’ programme is set to be rolled-out further, whichever party is in power after the next general election. Whilst Ed Balls has made fairly drastic adaptations to the scheme, both the Labour government and a prospective Conservative government are committed to the ‘independent’ state school model. In light of the Conservatives’ plans to rank subjects in the league tables, weighting the more ‘difficult’ academic subjects, it is remarkable that they are keen to roll-out the Academies programme while apparently knowing very little about which subjects Academies are doing. Nor do the Conservatives appear to want any assurances of a strong academic curriculum: the party has heavily criticised the government for reining in Academies’ freedoms on the curriculum front, with the introduction of an ‘expectation’ that the core National Curriculum be implemented.²⁸

The *raison d’être* of Academies – currently at least – is to improve the life chances of the least privileged. Ensuring that as many young people as possible achieve 5+ A*-C grades at GCSE is seen to be instrumental to this improvement. Improved life chances are however much less likely to be realised if the piece of paper Academy students walk away with shows not a handful of academic subjects, but single qualifications with high values in the league tables yet low value in life. Schools and policy-makers can use the dubious ‘parity’ of esteem between weak pseudo-vocational courses and GCSEs, the school-leaver cannot. Students are instead left with the reality: learning experiences and qualifications of questionable worth.

That English and maths are now a ‘necessary’ focus even in schools which do not have to publish their results, because they are included in the headline figures, is in many respects very welcome. Of more robust value, the 5+A*-C GCSEs with English and maths benchmark has at

²⁸ Gove, M. ‘Academies and Reform: Rhetoric and Reality,’ March 2008, Office of Michael Gove

least meant that the majority of students are entered for the two basic academic subjects. Nevertheless it is symptomatic of the current prominence of league table performance, that the incorporation of even these two courses is potentially pernicious, as other subjects find themselves at risk of neglect in the pursuit of good headline statistics. Worst still, as Kate Pretsell's account (p52) illustrates, the focus on borderline students in the statistical chase risks neglecting other *students*, not just other subjects.

Ultimately transparency in Academies' results is imperative to ensure that an already disproportionately disadvantaged cohort is not further disadvantaged by an impoverished curriculum. Without transparency but with political pressure for rapid improvement in exam results, there is too much incentive to manipulate the system. Only with complete openness can we know whether Academies are serving students well or only the reputation of the Academies' programme.

Just over half – 55 per cent – of those Academy principals who participated in the survey think that Academies' GCSE and equivalent results, broken down by subject, should be made publicly available. In turn, 28 per cent think that Academy results should *not* be made public, while 18 per cent are not sure. Together with the fact that 57 per cent of principals with at least one set of GCSE and equivalent results did not submit them, this suggests a strong element of reticence about their disclosure. Why?

A number of principals who believe that Academies should *not* have to release their exam results by subject, gave reasons.

The most notable explanation, given by a London-based Academy, strongly supports suspicions about why Academies might be reticent to release detailed accounts of their results:

‘Because it will identify the subjects that the academy has chosen, through its freedoms, not to prioritise e.g. separate sciences, geography etc...’

Along the same lines, another London-based principal is wary about comparisons with other schools:

‘While some GCSEs are comparable across schools, many are not (languages studied, the approach to science, different humanities emphases, specialist subjects, etc).’

When, as the submitted results reveal (p47), there are either very few or no geography and history GCSE entries for example, it is clear why this position would be adopted.

Another rationalisation for the non-publication of GCSE and equivalent results by subject put forward by several principals is ‘what's the point?’:

‘I don't really mind but what is the point exactly? Parents don't choose schools on exam results, especially in deprived areas.’ Yorkshire and the Humber-based Academy

‘I’m not sure what will be gained by making exam results by GCSE etc. public.’ London-based Academy

As Academies already publish their headline figures – and indeed make much of them (for example on their websites) – the ‘irrelevance’ of detail which would actually make the results much more nuanced and contextualised, is a particularly weak argument. The implication that ‘deprived’ parents do not require detailed information is a very controversial and arguably highly unsatisfactory position – strongly at odds with the government rhetoric of ‘parent power’.

In the same vein as the Yorkshire and the Humber-based Academy principal’s reservation, another principal in the South East argues against the publication of the GCSE and equivalent results by subject on the basis that:

‘[T]he results alone do not provide an accurate picture.’

The headline figures alone, however, arguably provides an even *less* accurate picture – something which has nevertheless not deterred this particular Academy from splashing its headline GCSE figures across their website. A North West-based Academy defends the withholding of detailed results on the grounds that these results would be:

‘Too subjective – depends on the size of the cohort etc.’

Or as another, Yorkshire and the Humber-based Academy principal, asserted:

‘Too much nonsense about league tables already in press. NB we are doing very well.’

It is worth noting that the latter Academy *did* submit their results to Civitas, revealing a very high proportion of vocational qualifications and low number of academic qualifications achieving A*-Cs.

Several principals expressed concern that Academies which replaced failing schools would be ‘shown-up’ by having to publish a breakdown of their GCSE and equivalent results:

‘Although [disclosure] seems logical on paper, it might be detrimental to academies that have replaced schools that were failing and may be counter-productive in the vital first years of the academy’s life.’ North West-based Academy

Again, it seems anomalous that more rather than less information would be detrimental to struggling Academies – unless their ‘collective’, headline results give a more positive impression.

To date, the basis on which the government has granted Academies exemption from the Freedom of Information Act, their independent status, is also cited by a number of principals as the rationale for keeping results back:

‘The accountability academies have should mirror exactly that conferred upon independent schools in the full sense. Thus governing bodies and trustees, answerable to their wider school communities, frame the focus of the academy and avoid local and national bureaucratic structures which diminish their capacity to meet their students’ needs effectively.’ East Midlands-based Academy

There is, however, a fundamental difference between Academies and independent schools in that Academies are funded by the tax-payer, thereby requiring apposite transparency, and independent schools are not.

Finally there is the position that ‘we’ll disclose our results if all others have to’:

‘Yes if all secondary schools were to do so, state and non-state.’ London-based Academy

Aside from the reality that all other *comparable* schools do already have to disclose a breakdown of their results, this position emphasises a concerning resistance to voluntary transparency.

One principal, of an Academy in the West Midlands, who did not release his Academy’s results, responded to the question of whether he would be willing to release them:

‘If I was given a clear rationale for doing so.’

The rationale is transparency.

Observations from submitted Academy results

Attaching a great weight to Academies' results may appear to be a crudely reductive approach to judging them. However for both those championing Academies in policy and Academy principals themselves (as borne out in the survey, see p20) the results are of utmost, if not primary, importance. Indeed it is this reality, such a myopic focus on results, which is ultimately the problem.

From the research process, as well as background information on school data tracking, it is reasonable to say that in times when 'data' in the form of exam results is such a significant factor in school assessment, *accessing* their exam results by subject was very unlikely to be the reason holding principals back from submitting their subject results. Indeed many Academies actually have staff employed under the job description of 'data analysts'. Statistical analysis of exam results is something which schools are compelled to engage in as part of 'tracking' assessment systems. Instead, a reluctance to release such data does strongly imply a reluctance for that data to be publicly disseminated. It would be perfectly reasonable to assert that Academies did not want to submit their exam results for this piece of research because they did not trust the assurance of anonymity. However, were anonymity to indeed be breached, the worst that would happen would be the public dissemination of the Academy's results. If this is a fear, as did transpire from a number of principals' responses, then that is deeply concerning.

As Academies were able to choose whether or not to submit their results, there is a self-selection bias in the results which have been analysed. In terms of response patterns, there is a definite correlation, although not a perfect one, between response to the survey, submission of results and the size of the 'gap' between headline figures. A higher proportion of those Academies with a large percentage gap between their latest 5+A*-C and 5+A*-C including English and maths did *not* either participate in the survey or release their results. A higher proportion of those Academies with amongst the smallest gap between their headline figures, in turn, did participate in the research and did, in turn, submit their results. This pattern may be no more than coincidental. (However, from those respondents who did not wish to release their results, we do know that a cited rationale relates to their subject choices.)

Regardless of a self-selection bias, the results submitted do present an insight into a range of scenarios, from the numbers of GCSE entries as compared to vocational subjects, to comparative performance in the two, to the contrasting performance of individual students in academic GCSEs and vocational subjects. It is important to note that the results submitted were not done so in a uniform format. Some sets are considerably more detailed than others, making precise cross-comparisons challenging. Academies' 'latest available GCSE and equivalent results i.e. the full list of GCSE and equivalent subjects taken and the number of pupils who achieved each

grade for each subject’ were asked for. In cases where data appeared to be missing, this was requested, as were any early entry GCSEs and equivalents (i.e. GCSEs and equivalents taken by students in years prior to Year 11). Whilst every effort has been taken to ensure that the results submitted provide the whole picture for the relevant cohort, it has been necessary to rely on the Academies providing full sets of results.

As vocational and academic GCSEs and equivalents are the focus of the following analysis, some background information on their relative ‘tariffs’ is useful.

A background to vocational qualifications and their ‘equivalence’

The table below presents a selection of the most popular courses known as ‘vocational’ or ‘vocationally-related’, and their value in the league tables as calculated by their levels in the National Qualifications Framework.

Level 1: equivalent to GCSE grades D-G
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edexcel BTEC Introductory Certificates (worth 2 GCSEs) assessed through ongoing exam-free assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edexcel BTEC Introductory Diploma (worth 4 GCSEs) assessed through ongoing exam-free assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OCR Level 1 National First Award/Certificate Level 1 (worth 1,3 or 4 GCSEs) centre-assessed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applied (or ‘vocational’) GCSEs, grades D-G (worth 2 GCSEs) assessed predominantly through ongoing assessment, with a maximum of a third of work assessed through examination
Level 2: equivalent to GCSE grades A*-C
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edexcel BTEC First Certificates level 2 (worth 2 GCSEs)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edexcel BTEC First Diploma level 2 (worth 4 GCSEs)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OCR Level 2 National Award/Certificate (also First Award/First Certificate for ICT) (worth 2 or 4 GCSEs)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applied (or ‘vocational’) GCSEs, grades A*-C (worth 2 GCSEs)

Individual sets of results: examples

Three out of the 16 sets of results submitted had a high number of GCSE entries, high performance in these GCSEs and high ‘headline’ 5+A*-C figures.

In a North-West-based Academy, Academy 1, which submitted its results, students are only entered for GCSEs. In this Academy, in line with the headline figure ‘gap’ hypothesis, the difference between the Academy’s 5 A*-C results with and without English and maths, is very small, and both figures are very high. This Academy, however, is the only one out of those which submitted results which did not have any vocational qualification entries.

Two other Academies, one based in Yorkshire and the Humber, Academy 2, and one in London, Academy 3, also have a very small gap between their 5+A*-C figures with and without English and maths. In both cases, their two sets of results are very high; and again, in line with the headline figure ‘gap’ hypothesis, each Academy’s performance in the GCSEs is very high. In each of these three Academies, the principals have stated that in their view Academy results, by subject, should be made publicly available. Academies 2 and 3 have a broad range of GCSE entries and a comparatively small range of vocational courses. In both cases, a (relatively) high proportion of students are entered for separate science GCSEs. Across the GCSEs, A*-C performance is high.

Example1: Academy 3

GCSE	English Language*	History	Geography	Biology	Chemistry	Physics
Entries	206	80	60	110	110	110
A*-C percentage	97	84	83	93	95	92

* Taken by majority of students therefore an approximate guide to size of cohort

It is worth pointing out that in Academies 2 and 3, all or the majority of their students are also being entered for high value vocational ICT qualifications (OCR Nationals in one and the Diploma in Digital Applications (DIDA) in the other): the A*-C rate in both Academies in these ICT qualifications is 100 per cent. With the DIDA qualification worth four A*-C grades, in the case of Academy 2, 21 per cent of their A*-C headline figure is constituted by this qualification.

GCSE entries and performance in the other Academies differ considerably.

At Academy 4, in the Yorkshire and Humber region, there are 174 BTEC entries and 124 Edexcel ICT entries. 100 per cent of the BTEC entries have achieved A*-Cs, as have 96 per cent of the Edexcel entries. In terms of the equivalence ‘value’ in the league tables, the BTECs are ‘worth’ 540 GCSE entries – in this case 540 A*-Cs – and the Edexcel qualifications 181 GCSEs – in this case 176 A*-Cs.

The actual *GCSE* performance of Academy 4 contrasts starkly. In the Academy’s 717 GCSE entries, 43 per cent have attained A*-Cs, with the highest A*-C rate 100 per cent for two single Polish and German entries, and the lowest A*-C rate 35 per cent for maths. In history there are only nine entries, 56 per cent of them hitting A*-C; there are no geography entries and other than the single entries for German and Polish, there are no further foreign language entries. There are also no separate science entries (i.e. GCSE entries in chemistry, biology, physics). The 5+A*-C figure when maths and English are included is less than half that of when they are not.

It is worth noting that the ‘gap hypothesis’ is supported by Academy 4: that is, the Academy is achieving a high proportion of its A*-C rate with vocational qualifications, a low proportion with GCSEs and has a very large disparity between its 5+A*-C and 5+A*-C with English and maths figures (the latter figure is less than half the former). Also worth noting, the principal of Academy 4 was of the view that Academies should *not* have to make their GCSE and equivalent results by subject publicly available.

Example 2: Academy 4

All GCSEs

GCSE	Entries	A*-C percentage
Maths	147	35
Science	148	44
Science Additional	132	41
German	1	100
Polish	1	100
English Language	147	40
English Literature	90	50
History	9	56
RE	42	71

All vocational qualifications

BTEC (combined Certificates and Diplomas)	Entries	League table 'value' (number of GCSEs equivalent to)	Percentage A*-C
Art & Design	41	140	100
Construction	21	76	100
Hospitality	25	54	100
Business Studies	21	42	100
Health and Social Care	8	26	100
Performing Arts	12	32	100
Sport	25	96	100
Music	2	8	100
Media	15	58	100
Travel and Tourism	4	8	100

Edexcel ICT			
AIDA	85	85	94
CIDA	23	46	100
CIDA+	14	42	100
DIDA	2	8	96

At Academy 5, in the East Midlands there are 2515 GCSE entries, 1624 of them gaining A*-C. 65 per cent of GCSE entries have achieved A*-C. At Academy 5 there are also 607 vocational (BTEC and OCR Nationals) entries, 100 per cent gaining A*-C. In terms of 'worth' in the league

tables, these vocational entries are ‘worth’ 1807 A*-C when their equivalence is added. Academy 5 again supports the ‘gap hypothesis’.

Generally, across the Academies which submitted results, the high performance of vocational entries is very noticeable. On the whole, these entries achieve 100 per cent A*-Cs.

At Academy 6, in the South West, approximately half of all students have been entered for Edexcel’s ICT CIDA (Certificate in Digital Applications), worth 2 GCSEs, and 100 per cent have achieved A*-Cs. In another vocational ICT qualification, the ICT OCR Nationals First Award, worth one GCSE, 100 per cent of students have also achieved A*-Cs.

There is similarly outstanding performance in the BTEC entries at Academy 7, also based in the South West. In the three BTECs (science, arts and sport) which students have been entered into (there is a total of 232 entries) the A*-C rate is 100 per cent. In terms of the equivalence ‘value’ in the league tables, altogether these entries are ‘worth’ 464 GCSEs – and subsequently 464 A*-Cs.

The comparative performance of individual students in vocational and GCSE courses provides another insight into the demands of vocational qualifications at this level. Again looking at Academy 7, for example, for which a breakdown of performance by individual student has been provided, it is possible to look at how each candidate has performed in each subject he/she has been entered for. Notably the entries show that students who have performed poorly in GCSE subjects invariably achieve the equivalent to an A*-C grade in their vocational entries. One student, for example, has achieved an F in maths, an E in English language, a D in science but the equivalent to two Cs in OCR’s ICT Nationals. Another student at this Academy, who has achieved Cs and Ds in her GCSE entries, has achieved the equivalent of two As in the ICT OCR Nationals.

It might be argued that the better performance of these students in vocational courses is due to the fact that their talents are more hands-on skills based. This argument is however untenable. It would be misleading to describe a vocational course in ICT or a science as requiring ‘hands-on’ skills. Nevertheless, at least in the results submitted, the dominant ‘vocational’ entries are indeed ICT and science. Neither vocational courses in ICT nor in science are sound examples of truly vocational learning. As Titcombe has put it, the GNVQ ICT and science were just ‘easier versions of existing well-established GCSE subjects’.²⁹ With the GNVQ regarded as having been

²⁹ Titcombe, R., ‘How Academies Threaten the Comprehensive Curriculum’, *Forum*, Volume 50, November 1, 2008, p56

replaced by, for example, OCR Nationals, the same conclusion can be drawn with today's vocational science and ICT qualifications.

‘GNVQ Intermediate ICT using online resources has boosted several schools significantly... At the end of the course 99 students gained the equivalent of 4 GCSEs at grade C or above. The potential for similar levels of achievement now exists with Edexcel Digital Applications and OCR Nationals in ICT qualifications.’

City of Leicester Children and Young People's Services: Learning Services³⁰

Whilst Ofsted has frequently praised the ‘breadth’ of Academies’ curricula in its reporting, alluding to the offer of a mixture of vocational and academic options, the inspectorate has been unusually critical of vocational ICT qualifications, in particular Edexcel’s ICT qualification DIDA (Diploma in Digital Applications) and OCR’s Nationals ICT qualifications. These qualifications, worth up to four A*-C passes, have been identified by Ofsted as being ‘less demanding’ than ICT GCSE courses and ‘of doubtful value’.³¹

Overall, the striking consistency of high performance in vocational entries against a background of very divergent GCSE performance in the Academies, corroborates with the argument that the vocational alternatives to GCSE currently available are simply less challenging.

As Roger Titcombe’s previous research into Academy curricula noted, vocational qualifications, ICT qualifications in particular, are making a significant difference to Academies’ headline results. One highly successful (results-wise) London-based Academy, for example, enters all of its students for Edexcel’s DIDA. Worth four GCSEs, this year 100 per cent of students achieved four A*-C GCSEs through the course. The same applies to a successful Academy in the East Midlands where all students have been entered for a vocational ICT qualification worth four GCSEs, and a 100 per cent A*-C equivalent pass rate has been achieved this year.

Without vocational subjects, the headline performance at GCSE of a number of Academies is considerably lower than it is when they are included. To give an example of an Academy which is performing very well in its 5+A*-C GCSEs and equivalent figure, but much less well when English and maths are included: this Academy in the East Midlands has an A*-C rate which drops 21 percentage points when only GCSEs are included. Whilst the GCSE A*-C rate is 65 per cent, it is 100 per cent for all of the vocational equivalents (in this case, OCR Nationals and BTECs). For example, there were 44 entries in the BTEC Travel and Tourism First Certificate,

³⁰ City of Leicester Children and Young People's Services: Learning Services, Richard White: Strategies for Raising Attainment, October 2006

³¹ Stewart, W., ‘Vocational ICT Courses Condemned’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 6th March 2009

worth two GCSEs. 100 per cent of the entries in this subject achieved a pass, which is equivalent to two A*-Cs. This contrasts with a 46 per cent A*-C rate in maths, a 58 per cent A*-C rate in English language and a 61 per cent A*-C rate in English literature.

In this Academy, it is also interesting to note the difference between students' 'headline' performance according to free school meal entitlement, for which data is included. While the overall difference between the 5+A*-C rate including English and maths and without English and maths is 57 per cent, the difference is 75 per cent for those students eligible for free school meals. From other evidence on the relationship between free school meal entitlement and vocational qualification take-up, it can be speculated that this larger gap may be accounted for by a high number of A*-C vocational entries.

In Academies' defence, an argument may be that Academies are particularly successful at vocational subjects. Yet, as Academies are not being sold as specialist vocational schools, even were this to be the case, it would still be a fairly indefensible position. A more plausible argument is that it is, simply *easier* to succeed in vocational subjects.

Schools are certainly clear on the 'benefits' of vocational qualifications for students who are not doing well in school. An example of where this has been made explicit is at Stoke Newington School in Hackney. As seen on their website, Stoke Newington School provided students who were going into their first year of GCSEs in September 2008 with an 'Options Guidance Pack'. The aim of the guidance pack was for students, parents and tutors to decide which options at GCSE would be best. The main basis for making this decision was how well a student had performed in their Key Stage 2 Sats tests. For those students who had achieved low marks in the tests the message was this:

[In 'Understanding how well you are doing'] 'A SAT score of less than 14 means that your chances of getting 5 A to C grades as a minimum at GCSE are greatly reduced following a standard GCSE curriculum and you should strongly consider following a BTEC or Diploma course as well as the GCSE courses.' (Hackney is one of the first local authorities which will be able to offer the Diploma from September 2008).³²

Absent academic subjects: history and geography

Below are some examples of Academies' history and geography GCSE entries. The number of English language entries has been taken as approximately equating with the number of students in the cohort. In several Academies the number of history and geography entries is relatively

³² Stoke Newington School, Options Guidance Pack 2008-09 (<http://www.sns.hackney.sch.uk/>)

high, as is the A*-C rate within those subjects. In a number of other Academies, however, the number of entries is very small, and the A*-C rate low.

As can be seen, in some Academies, for example the North East-based Academy in Example d (p47), only seven students are achieving an A*-C grade in GCSE history, and just three students are achieving an A*-C grade in geography. In this Academy there are 15 entries for geography and history respectively, compared to 226 in English language. The geography and history entries constitute half the number entered for Catering GCSE, and a quarter of the number entered for Resistant Materials.

History and geography – history in particular – have noticeably low numbers of entries in the majority of Academies which submitted results. In one Academy in the Yorkshire and Humber region, see Example c, only nine students were entered for history in the 2008/09 exams, compared to 148 entries for English language. No students were entered for geography.

Another Academy in the East Midlands had 12 entries for history and geography respectively, compared to 224 entries for English language. The entries in geography and history were, notably, fewer than half the number entered for Office Technology.

Another Academy in Greater London had 18 entries in history and 19 in geography, compared to 131 in English language.

Results of those Academies with the highest proportion of GCSE history and geography entries

Example a

	English Language	History	Geography
Entries	163	45	62
A*-C percentage	95	98	82

Example b

	English Language	History	Geography
Entries	206	80	60
A*-C percentage	97	84	83

Results of those Academies with the lowest proportion of GCSE history and geography entries

Example c

	English Language	History	Geography
Entries	147	9	0
A*-C percentage	40	56	0

Example d

	English Language	History	Geography
Entries	226	15	15
A*-C percentage	32	43	20

Example e

	English Language	History	Geography

Entries	192	29	61
A*-C percentage	58	59	41

Example f

	English Language	History	Geography
Entries	173	32	22
A*-C percentage	53	38	41

The decline in academic subjects is affecting all mainstream schools, not just Academies. This reality does not however exonerate Academies in view of the fact that the Academy programme is in theory *improving* the educational opportunities of the most disadvantaged – rather than further entrenching weaknesses in mainstream state schools.

It is perhaps also worth adding that a number of the GCSEs in which students are entered for are not ‘traditionally’ academic, for example Dance and Drama. These two examples are perhaps more conventional than some of the other GCSEs present in Academies’ submitted results, such as Resistant Materials, Office Technology, Health and Social Care, Astronomy and Catering. Another related point, not explored in this research, but discussed at length elsewhere, is the rigour of currently available GCSEs *themselves*. Related to this point are the issues associated with science not being taken as individual subjects, but as ‘combined’ science – again, a topic on which there has been much discussion. Finally, the notion of an ‘academic’ curriculum, in this instance, is very basic: Latin (for which there are three entries in only one Academy) and modern foreign languages have very low, if any, GCSE entries, in the Academies which submitted their results.

Future lessons

Stark examples, such as that of Academy 4 in Yorkshire and the Humber, outlined on p41, illustrate what may potentially be happening more widely. The retort to such a high number of vocational entries reaching A*-C and low number of academic entries reaching A*-C might be that a vocational education is as valuable as an academic one. However, firstly the quality of the vocational options on offer is, as discussed earlier, highly questionable. Secondly, to reiterate, Academies are being sold as schools providing an excellent mainstream education – *not* specialist vocational schools.

What the submitted results reveal about Academies' GCSE and equivalent performance, re-asserts the urgent need for transparency. An Academy which is gaining its headline A*-C figures on the basis of academic GCSE entries is not comparable to an Academy which is gaining its A*-C figures on the basis of low numbers of academic entries and high numbers of vocational entries. Nor, all-importantly, is it comparable to a school deemed to be failing because it is achieving below A*-Cs in academic subjects – the schools which have often been replaced by Academies. If Academies are granted curricula freedoms allowing them to replace academic subjects with vocational subjects then that must be made completely clear in their published data. In conclusion, from the results submitted by Academies, there does appear to be some correlation with the percentage point difference between the headline A*-C figure and the A*-C including English and maths figure, and the proportion of A*-C entries which have been achieved through vocational subjects. In other words, there is preliminary evidence to support the so-called 'gap hypothesis'. The strongest correlation is in the case of a very *small* difference between the two headline figures: those Academies with a smaller 'gap' have a higher GCSE performance record.

The findings cannot however provide conclusive evidence that the hypothesis is correct. Nevertheless, even if the 'gap hypothesis' itself is spurious, the fact remains that any significant disparity between the headline figures of Academies and those of mainstream schools itself warrants investigation.

Case study 1: The experience of a student at the Harris Academy Purley

Reported by Warwick Mansell

‘Pupils at a new academy in south London are being forced to take a vocational course in sport in a move which a parent says is motivated by the school’s need to rise up the league tables.

Moira Macdonald is concerned that her daughter, like all other year 10 students at the Harris Academy Purley, near Croydon, is being given no choice but to take the sports BTEC, which is said by the Government to be worth two GCSEs.

She says that the course, for which her daughter has had to drop French GCSE, will do nothing to prepare the 15-year-old for university or her chosen career. Moreover, she says that while the BTEC’s weighting in the league tables might help the academy’s ability to improve results and therefore to claim to have “turned round” the school, in reality parents will not be able to see for themselves full details on what has driven any rise in the scores.

The academy, one of a chain of nine new schools across south London, replaced Haling Manor school at short notice in September. Students from the former school had already chosen their options last May when it emerged that it would be replaced by an academy, which is specialising in sport.

Under the old school’s system, French was compulsory. But in May, Dr Dan Moynihan, chief executive of the Harris Federation which runs the schools, wrote to parents with details of a new options system, saying that students would be “required” to do a BTEC in sport. French became optional.

The academy’s options structure only allows pupils to take up to two optional GCSEs alongside compulsory GCSEs in English, maths, science, enterprise, religious studies and the BTEC sports course. Ms Macdonald’s daughter opted for history and geography.

The old school permitted three GCSEs alongside core subjects of English language and literature, maths, science, French, citizenship and religious education, although it also appears to have included a compulsory BTEC, in “employability skills”.

The academy options booklet also shows the new school planning to teach the BTEC First Certificate in Sport in only three periods a week, compared to five devoted to maths GCSE. Yet the BTEC gains twice the league table points of a maths GCSE.

Ms Macdonald said a teacher told her that the BTEC would be “easy to pass”.

She said: “The academy is promising massively improved results and I am not surprised considering they are making soft subjects compulsory and dumping hard-earned GCSEs.

“The Harris Academy overrode the GCSE core subjects set for my daughter and her colleagues before the takeover, in order to improve their league table results.

“This is no way to educate kids – they need to be taught proper subjects and come away with proper qualifications.”

She added that the course might help the school’s results. But it was not in her daughter’s interests to be studying it, as she had no plans to take up a career in sport. She said the school had been lined up to be replaced by the academy because, with only 25 per cent of students achieving five good GCSEs, or “equivalent”, including English and maths, it was on the Government’s National Challenge scheme which threatens schools achieving under 30 per cent with closure.

Ms Macdonald said: “[If the school’s results improve] the academy will be able to boast they have turned the school around, but my daughter’s education and future prospects will suffer.

“And, more widely, future parents will not be able to tell if the academy has turned the school round or not as the league table results will have been fixed.”

She added: “If I had looked at this school for my daughter in year six with the knowledge that it was going to be a sports academy, I would have made that a consideration as to whether or not we chose the school. What is annoying is that this has happened completely without any consultation for the kids who are already lined up to be taking GCSEs.”

A spokeswoman for Harris Academy Purley told the Croydon Advertiser newspaper, which reported Ms Macdonald's concerns in November 2009, that BTECs were emphatically not a soft option, adding that French remained an optional choice for its pupils.

She added: “We have a broad and inclusive curriculum but, within this, are focusing on making sure every student has the core skills of literacy and numeracy that they need to succeed in all of their other subjects.

“Our curriculum will mean our students are well-educated and equipped to compete to the best of their abilities when it comes to universities and the jobs market.””

Case study 2: The experience of a teacher at Haberdashers' Aske's Knights Academy (HAKA)

Inside an Academy: the experiences of English teacher Kate Pretsell at Haberdashers' Aske's Knights Academy (HAKA), a specialist sports Academy, sponsored by the Haberdashers within a threefold academy concept – Knights, Hatcham College and Crayford Academy – in Lewisham.

Kate Pretsell is an English teacher at HAKA. She joined the Academy on the Teach First scheme, in 2007. This year, her second at HAKA, she has become Literacy Coordinator.

'I have taught English for one year at Haberdashers' Aske's Knights Academy in Lewisham. I have taught years 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11; the bottom sets in years 9, 10 and 11, a middle set at year 7 and the top set in year 8. I have also had a year 7 tutor group. This year I have been promoted to Literacy Coordinator and so I will begin my NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher) year with extra responsibility.

The building

HAKA replaced Malory School. The final capital cost of the development was £40.4 million. HAKA is at the centre of the sprawling Downham estate – a deprived post-WWI estate comprised of over 6, 000 Local Authority residences. It does stand out from other mainstream schools in its radical, forward-thinking design perspective and dogged determination to prove a point to the sceptics and league tables alike.

The physical redevelopment of the school's site has an overarching learning-centric focus. Every nuance of the design is in place to facilitate and maximise student achievement and success. The template of the whole building symbolises lifelong learning; built in the shape of a large arc the structure is designed to reflect a "learning curve". The underlying principle being that students should never reach a terminus to their education: literally within the school walls and also figuratively. The architecture marries the sports specialist status with the theme of academic learning; sprawling Astroturf pitches and a multi-purpose sports hall are embedded subtly into the design. At the heart of the school lies what is dubbed the 'think tank', the central staff headquarters.

The circumstances a student learns in must be conducive to having adequate personal space, opportunities for both private and shared thinking and a sense of safety and security. The classrooms and communal spaces at HAKA attempt to unify these concepts. The architect has created some huge vaulted spaces, combining mono-direction stairwells and broad, bright corridors to combat student traffic and to foster smooth transitions from lesson to lesson.

The previous building, which housed Malory School, was a one-storey eyesore and one of the most pronounced effects the new construction has had on the ethos of the student body is that it has dramatically reduced the previously destructive behaviour of some students. £19,000 a year was spent by the maintenance team on replacing smashed windows in the previous school: that works out at 12 windows a day on average. According to staff members who moved over from the old school, there is a tangibly positive difference in the attitude of the student body, generally.

HAKA also benefits from extensive technical facilities rarely seen in mainstream schools. State of the art interactive whiteboards adorn every single classroom, MAC PCs are used in the Art and Design departments and every third classroom is equipped with a stock of 30 laptops. A 'Virtual Learning Environment' (VLE) system is about to be launched whereby parents, teachers and students all have a web-based profile page and can all interact with ease regarding homework, behavioural issues and termly schemes of work. At present, the VLE is not going to replace any face-to-face parent-teacher interaction. The aim is merely to enhance the ease with which teachers can communicate with already supportive parents (many of whom teachers email on a daily basis after each lesson with their child for an update) and to help build bridges with the more reticent, or 'unsupportive' parents. Personal meetings with parents will always still occur in serious situations but the idea is that the VLE will augment existing communication. It is hoped that the VLE will also allow for clearer organisation of homework projects too; students will be able to query their work outside of school hours.

The very premise of the VLE is however questionable: many students do not own a computer at home, let alone have internet access. Creating a parent-teacher-student interaction zone is a potentially brilliant prospect but may well be unrealistic at this stage.

Whilst there are benefits, the building has fundamental problems. The school is, it transpires, too small to fit the numbers it is hoping to hold over the next few years. Many classes are cramped and often teachers have to be inventive with the space allocated to them. This impacts on the teaching of larger classes hugely. My largest class has 28 (it had 31 last year) students but I have seating for only 26. Students are cramped and the classroom becomes chaotic and discipline inevitably becomes poor. Trying to control a large number of pupils who are themselves uncomfortable is a logistical nightmare. Physical access to those students who need help is hindered, yet singling them out to sit at the front just makes them feel humiliated and vulnerable. As a result, teaching and learning does suffer. This structural problem is the case for most non-science and art and design classes (Science and Art and Design has very large suites).

Furthermore, it is an issue which looks set to be exacerbated. If the number of students continues to grow the Academy will not manage to sustain such a sizable student body. This is particularly so with the burgeoning sixth-form already in place.

One way in which the Academy is attempting to deal with this scenario is by trialling smaller classes. From this September there are plans to introduce a larger number of smaller classes at Key Stage 3 (staff figures permitting).

The issues which the Academy faces beg the question of whether, in both the case of the new building and new communications' technology this swift and drastic new school development is ultimately just a superficial, cosmetic change with no substantial effect on the students, staff or community? Is it merely a gleaming façade?

The specialism

The Academy's sports specialism has a great bearing on school-life. To an extent it has attracted a different calibre of student, but it has also drawn on and augmented the existing student talent in the previous school. The sporting department is extremely well-equipped, with specialist staff and nationally acclaimed basketball and football teams. Olympians, top athletes and sporting names occasionally come into school to complete workshops and give talks. The forthcoming Olympics are set to be an intensive focus. Initially the male students seemed to be excelling far more than the girls and it appeared that there were far more resources, staffing and facilities dedicated to developing the boys' sports but more recently the girls have been extensively invested in (especially the football teams).

It is however, a growing concern amongst staff that the specialism has too great a bearing on the daily routine of the academy. Many students miss a wealth of lessons in the name of training, matches and competitions. Although everyone works hard to ensure that gifted sportsmen and women receive a rounded education it often does not play out that way. Non-sporting students often appear sidelined as champion individuals and teams are glorified; this has a deep-seated effect on the impressionable school ethos and it occasionally feels as though 'heroes' are cultivated amongst the student body.

The Academy is nevertheless fostering some highly committed and passionate young people with very high aspirations to work in the sporting world (in many capacities). The academy has worked hard to make them feel valued and ambitious in a society where otherwise they feel they have very limited options. The academy has provided a number of students with future options, and the confidence to strive for high goals, which they would not have been able to access in a mainstream school.

A core part of the Knights Academy's management structure is that the principal is allowed to implement his own strategies, behaviour codes and exclusion rates. He reports to a governing body, in this case the Haberdashers, who are also the school sponsors. The principal is required to follow the strategic frameworks for secondary schools, but is able to vary the way in which it is delivered. His position as a principal is similar in most senses to that of a head teacher in a comprehensive school, with the exception of the independence the school has from the local

authority. In the specific context of HAKA, as a principal within a federation of schools, he is less autonomous, because he has to work within the constraints of the federation's policies, vision and ethos. He also reports to a CEO (Dr Elizabeth Sidwell) and a Governors' Liaison Committee. However, as principal, he sits on the federation leadership team and can influence the implementation of those policies and the vision and ethos.

In the day-to-day management of the school, the principal has relative autonomy and will be held accountable for all aspects of the academy's academic performance. At HAKA, the current principal's plans revolve around "improving the outcomes for all students attending HAKA and ensuring that all students and staff enjoy being at HAKA". He is required to oversee the improvement in outcomes for students and needs to ensure that the school remains out of National Challenge status. His priorities will then be to:

- a. Reinforce the core values of high expectations, promoting excellence and mutual respect
- b. Improve the quality of learning and teaching across the school
- c. Embed Assessment for Learning: student data tracking
- d. Enable students to learn in an environment conducive to effective learning
- e. Encourage independent learning
- f. Develop staff
- g. Improve attendance and punctuality
- h. Develop consistent practices – registration; tutorials; homework policy; behaviour management
- i. Build on and celebrate successes

The Academy Leadership Team (ALT), headed by the principal, is a "core" of both expertise and management and has a very strong presence around the school. Their behaviour management strategies are highly effective and amongst the staff the ALT is generally held in high regard. All members are highly experienced teachers, who are willing to provide comprehensive continuing professional development to new teachers when the time allows. They are a driving force for the school providing (among other things) professional support for staff and developing new internal school policy well beyond the means of a mainstream school. However, it is commonly felt that the ALT are not totally "in touch" with the rest of the teaching staff because some are on heavily reduced timetables as they are locked into extensive administration duties and target-driven bureaucracy. This differs from mainstreams schools predominantly on the basis of the intensity of the target culture: the management is dominated by what seems to a constant influx of new incentives and pressures from the federation and government alike.

When HAKA was Malory School there was a high staff turnover; this is steadily dropping now and new staff (NQTs especially) are much more inclined to stay on at the school because of the improved career-prospects and (in some cases) better financial incentives academies offer. However, a glut of staff transferred from the old school and as a result a sense of resentment

towards the new site and the academy status pervades the middle management. Many of the old staff were given positions as middle-leaders when the school changed status. These negative feelings often plague staff working underneath said middle managers. There are undercurrents of disaffection amongst the rest of the staff too, and some departments are still in dire need of better quality teaching provision; these are the departments which are tantamount to relics from the old comprehensive school. The academy status appears to have promised radical changes to these areas that have not been affected and do not look set to be realised. There have been instances where some very low achieving sets have received science and English lessons from a teaching assistant or an unqualified teacher (by this I do not mean Teach First), working alone, because the respective departments simply do not have enough staff to accommodate all of the classes. The emphasis on targeting the middle C/D (GCSE score) borderline sets has meant that in situations such as these, the lowest achievers are the ones that suffer.

The school has forged very strong links with the Federation's existing (ex-grammar) school, Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham College also in Lewisham. There are clear benefits to this partnership. The departments are able to resource-share, pool ideas and create cross-federation events, competitions and initiatives. The Combined Cadet Forces of both schools train together and at KS3 the respective school choirs perform together. There is a 'federation sixth form' that has conjoined both schools and many students study for A levels and vocational courses on both sites. Still in its nascent stages, so far the sixth form has proved to be a successful, cohesive and fluid link between the two schools.

A restorative justice pilot scheme has also been trialled whereby students can be transferred from HAKA to Hatcham College for a six-week spell (or in some cases, a permanent transfer) if their behaviour or work ethic is slipping. The 'grammar school' label is, ostensibly, still attached to Hatcham College and relocating pupils has been successful: when students return to HAKA they appear to be much more motivated, well-disciplined and eager to learn. It is essentially a way of 'positively' penalising students by exposing them in the long-term, to a new learning environment that at present does appear more privileged. Hatcham has an enduringly good reputation (GCSE pass rates including English and Maths were at 93 per cent compared to Knight's 19 per cent in 2008), which strengthens the 'switching' programme. HAKA is still working hard to overcome the stigma of being Malory School, once dubbed by the *News of the World* as 'the worst school in Britain'. The hope is that the two schools' intake is levelled so that one day their admissions match one another.

However there are issues with the effect that the partnership with Hatcham has had on the (perceived) selectivity of HAKA. Martin Powell-Davies, the secretary of Lewisham National Union of Teachers (NUT), has completed extensive research into academies in Lewisham. His report, *The Campaign Against Academies in Lewisham*, throws light on some of the admissions data for HAKA and the detrimental effect this has had on neighbouring schools. He questions whether the academy is simply creating another sink school nearby to replace it. By exploiting its

partnership with HAHC and the Haberdasher namesake HAKA cashes in on the Askean ‘fair banding’ system, based on separate tests undertaken by academy-applicants. This ‘fair banding’ relies on dissuading less-academic, local working-class candidates from applying because of the federation’s high-ranking reputation whilst still encouraging applications from a ‘wide radius’ whereby ‘places will be offered in each [ability] band in proportion to the number of children applying in each band’. The argument is that this then creates a false impression of a proportionate intake which is, in reality, much more able.

The figures for each band adjust over time. Powell-Davies’ findings are as follows:

Malory School (2004) becoming HAKA (2005+)

Admissions band	1A	1B	2A	2B	3	Unknown
2004	3	12	23	42	67	0
2005	25	27	34	29	24	11
2006	26	37	27	29	28	10
2007	31	35	45	48	38	11

Powell argues that HAKA has attracted more applicants, and has been able to admit higher numbers of higher-ability banded students. Therefore the trend is an increase in the numbers of higher-banded students in recent times. This has happened as the school has to admit the same ratio of abilities that apply, and by widening its catchment area, more clever pupils apply and so the school can afford to take in brighter students.

There is indeed a very obvious ever-growing mass of middle-class families at HAKA, which correlates with Powell-Davies’ findings. The most recent year 11 were the last year to have been taught at Malory School before the academy began its incremental takeover and the disparity between the students’ relative ability in this y11 cohort compared to the other years (most notably the current KS3) is remarkable: they are comparatively much less able.

The results

There has been an unequivocal increase in 5 + A*-C and equivalent (incl. English and maths) since the Academy’s inception. Sitting at just below 19 per cent before the latest GCSE results the school’s target was to reach 33 per cent this summer: it has in fact now reached 35 per cent. The clear improvement can be attributed to many things: more expertise in the staffroom, happier teaching staff, a larger number of brighter students being accepted in year 7, newer facilities fostering a better work ethic and an increased uptake of vocational subjects. This last

factor is very significant: because of the specialist status, all students are required to take a sports BTEC (often at a younger level than Key Stage 4, discussed below) which undoubtedly drives up the results.

The importance attached to improving results has itself had an undoubtedly large impact. For example, over the past academic year, there has been an untoward emphasis on C/D borderline students. Staff have been overworked to the extreme and have been forced to innovate to keep student engagement at a maximum. Weekly evening classes have taken place in both English and Maths, Saturday all-day sessions have been implemented, as well as holiday 2-3 day courses and even a Big Brother-style boot camp whereby the students collected tokens during the prior weeks from their teachers if their effort in lessons was good. These tokens then paid for extra rewards during the boot camp. It became more of a case of plying students with incentives to get them to attend the revision classes and then drumming exam-prep into them relentlessly. Heads of department in both the English and Maths departments have suffered from acute stress.

Aside from focusing on the ‘borderliners’, certain C/D borderline students have also been forced to give up subjects that they really enjoy in order to lever extra English and maths into their timetables. This has had a hugely adverse effect on the motivation of these individuals: taking away a subject they excel at such as textiles but that will not boost the academy GCSE results, deflates their willingness to achieve at anything else. They feel like another cog in the Academy machinery. The focus on C/D borderline students has meant some students losing out. The very low achievers have been relegated and feel disenfranchised beyond repair; the high-ability students are somewhat neglected too, though to a lesser extent. These seem to be some major pitfalls of Academy autonomy.

Generally, the school has capitalised on the comparative autonomy of academy curricula. Teaching and learning at Key Stage 3 (KS3) (which covers years 7, 8 and 9) has undergone drastic change, with the KS3 curriculum compressed into years 7 and 8. A wealth of specialised opportunities is on offer at KS3, from Mandarin and Graphic Design to subsidised academic excursions, all of which are very well received. Students then start GCSE coursework and exam skills in year 9, with the aim of taking some pressure off years 10 and 11. The idea is that they get a sizable fraction of their final qualifications completed before the ‘official’ Key Stage 4. The main examples of this have been in maths GCSE, sports and ICT BTECs and GCSE English language and literature coursework. English as a second language students also commonly take a GCSE in their native language at an early stage, partly as a boost to their confidence and of course, partly as a boost to their examinations record.

The reasoning behind this reorganisation is largely due to the idea that exam skills are better built over three instead of two years. Within this arrangement students are considered to be more familiar with KS4 grading earlier on (rather than KS3 levelling) and have a better chance of attaining a C. Teachers are not bound to either ‘irrelevant’ or ‘restrictive’ topics and have time to

develop and ingrain functional skills into students at a far more leisurely pace instead of the otherwise ubiquitous ‘cramming’ in year 11.

It is pertinent to ask, however, whether the compressed KS3 curriculum is actually achieving the opposite of its remit and restricting HAKA students’ education from an even *earlier* age than would be the case otherwise in favour of raising the GCSE achievement bar? Arguably KS3 is a crucial bridge between primary education and GCSE courses in which valuable skills are learnt and developed. Undermining this transitional phase by compacting KS3 courses is potentially very risky. Have the students really got a full skills-set under their belts by the time they reach year 9? Year 9 is traditionally seen as a notoriously difficult year group to teach, age-wise, is embarking prematurely on an extended course (often with little room for innovation) the right decision? There is a very real danger that students will simply end up repeating course-content and become disaffected with low grades at a very early stage, despite the fact that the changes to the curriculum are designed to “develop and ingrain” functional skills. Students are very young to be writing coursework in year 9; this time would more logically be spent focusing on the preliminary core skills, such as *how* to write essays in any subject or the basics of literacy and numeracy. Whilst the idea is to avoid “restrictive or irrelevant” topics, the course has now become completely one-track – no “love of learning” is propagated here. Although it is right that year 9 should be in some way separate from KS3, it should not be used as a subsidiary year tacked onto GCSE preparation. Concretely this translates into, for example, the novel studied in year 8 English lessons being a GCSE text; as a result, in some cases students will leave HAKA having studied only one Shakespeare play (one done to death in every year of secondary teaching).

Autonomy has been used to great effect at KS3 and has revolutionised teaching and learning in years 7 and 8. Understandably the academy has to conform to the pressures of breaking out of National Challenge status by ensuring their students are well-equipped for GCSEs but it is very limiting and prescriptive.’

Discussion

Critics of Academies are vociferous and accruing in number at a grass-roots level, but noticeably absent from Westminster: all three main political parties support the Academies' programme. The largest group of co-ordinated critics, the Anti-Academy Alliance, are ostensibly of the view that a) Academies are selecting both via the backdoor and the front door and b) that Academies, contrary to the purported 'buoying' effect are impacting negatively on other schools in the same catchment area.

Fiona Millar, education campaigner and Chair of Comprehensive Future has contributed significantly to scepticism around Academies.

For Millar, the problem with the Academy model is its fundamental structure – as well as the details

'My main reservations about the academies are that they are independent schools not maintained schools. They lie outside any democratically accountable structure and give too much power to the sponsors at the expense of other stakeholders and the local community. Parents and pupils in academies don't have the same voice or rights as they would have in a maintained school where they are protected by a huge body of law. Academies are only governed by their funding agreements which are essentially commercial contracts that contain a watered down version of the legal requirements on other schools (depending on which bits the sponsor is prepared to accept.) If that weren't the case, there would be no point in them being academies.

'One of the contradictions in the current academy model is the requirement to sign up to a model funding agreement that purports to make them 'like community' schools. Many academy heads and sponsors like to boast that they are in effect running 'community' schools. Why then do they need to be academies, apart from the fact that they were probably blackmailed into it using the Building Schools for the Future money?'

'There is no evidence to suggest that independence alone, or the addition of a sponsor, is the magic bullet that will turn around a failing school. The number of academies that are failing or only satisfactory bears witness to that. Those that are doing well, like Mossbourne Academy, which incidentally didn't replace a failing school because its predecessor school was abolished years before, appear to be doing so because they are new schools, with new teachers and a new fully comprehensive intake, allied to outstanding heads, high expectations, rigour and good teaching. THAT is the formula we need to replicate, not the independent model.

'I can see a case for giving all schools more freedom in some areas, curriculum, how they vary the school day and use staff etc but it seems irrational to give freedoms to some schools (that were failing!) and not allow them to others that might be doing quite a good job. However some of the freedoms academies may have – in areas like special educational needs, exclusions, admissions – shouldn't in my view be given to any school.

'I think the compromise way forward would be to allow schools to form partnerships with sponsors or outside bodies, universities and so on, but within the maintained school sector, i.e. community/co-operative trust schools, so the sponsors don't get overall control on the governing body. All schools could then have more autonomy in the area of teaching, learning and the curriculum, but in return all should be required to

work within the same regulatory framework in SEN, exclusions and admissions, fair access partnerships etc, which would protect the least vocal and most vulnerable pupils and their families.

Meanwhile, government and local authorities could get on with the real job of ensuring there were enough good/outstanding heads and teachers to go round!

Significantly, some of those within the system also have reservations about the current programme. Whilst some principals praised the programme, a number of Academy principals who participated in the survey, expressed a variety of related concerns about both the current design of the Academy programme and the expectations of Academies. One concern relates to the changes in the freedoms which Academies are granted:

‘Academies are on a collision course of failure. The government is showing that it doesn’t trust principals and sponsors and is increasingly rationing the freedoms of Academies, just as it did with grant-maintained schools. And they’re opening them too quickly.’ London-based Academy

This is a view also held by the principal of one of the very first Academies to be established:

‘The most recent Academies have less freedom, less independence from LA’s, and will be less successful as a result. Academies should return to the original concept: follow the CTC model, but with the tighter compliance on admissions.’ Yorkshire and the Humber-based Academy

Another concern which emerged from the principals, is the speed with which the Academies’ programme is being rolled-out is of concern:

‘We are concerned to see amateurs being given control of Academies: LAs and universities taking on the role – universities know nothing of 11-18 education and LA’s have failed in the first place. Also interesting to see schools with high CVA becoming Academies and seriously underperforming schools who are coasting being left alone... Organisations with experience and track records should be those who take on these responsibilities. The speed of taking on sponsors. Lack of buildings and proper staff training, plus the cost (to students in the classroom) of TUPE are other concerns.’ Yorkshire and the Humber-based Academy

Overall there is a sense that the government is pushing for too much haste on every front in the Academies’ programme. The most pertinent concern to this piece of research was that expressed by the two principals who gave in-depth interviews. In two very contrasting Academies where the principals agreed to be interviewed, there was a strong feeling that the emphasis on improving performance was too much.

The principal of one of these, an Academy based in Yorkshire and the Humber thinks that the expectations of Academies when it comes to exam performance are untenable:

‘I have a real anxiety that people expect to see improvement happen over-night. I’m worried that the expectation is that it has to happen now.

‘There are unrealistic expectations about the trajectory of improvement. We’re bombarded all the time with these expectations. It’s not just about tapping latent talent. We have children from some of the most challenging contexts; it’s not going to be possible to close the gap quickly.

‘I see that reaching GCSE floor targets is important, but they shouldn’t be the only thing. You can’t just stick kids from these difficult contexts in a uniform and sit them in front of a good teacher, it’s not going to press a magic button.’

Another Academy principal in the North West concurs with this view:

‘There is too much political pressure for rapid turn-around in results. The success of an academy cannot be based purely on GCSE or equivalent output, important as it is. There are many other challenges to overcome in the early years e.g. dispelling the predecessor school’s poor public perception etc.’

The principal of a South East-based Academy, who was interviewed, argues that this emphasis on results is down to political priorities:

‘The focus on results is a real problem. We’re the most over-tested nation on earth. It’s a political question though – politicians like to say that more and more people have qualifications, whilst at the same time there is more and more knife crime.

‘It’s hitting the target and missing the point: if it’s just about numbers then we’ll be in a situation where everyone is getting five A*-Cs and a couple of A-levels but unemployment, crime, teenage pregnancy is going up. That’s what will happen if we choose to play that game.

‘Ofsted claims to also be looking at the social and moral development of students but actually they’re not really interested in whether young people are unemployed or murderers – Ofsted and the government don’t care as long as people have qualifications.’

Academy status

Looking at principals’ responses regarding which elements contribute to Academies’ successes, are these elements ‘inherent’ to the Academy model?

In the current schools’ landscape, the majority of respondents, 70 per cent, feel that the success of their Academy could not have been replicated in a school without Academy status.

Elaborations on why this is so, reveal a view that it is not the Academy model *per se* which is appealing, but rather the opportunity it presents to escape the current limitations imposed on mainstream maintained schools. As one principal commented, it is not in fact those things which we have come to associate with Academies – the building, the smart new uniforms and the sophisticated technology – which are making the difference.

Much, particularly in the early days of the Academies’ programme, has been made of the significance of a new expensive school building. However, the results of the survey suggest that the building is not in fact regarded as an instrumental contributor to the success of the Academy. This can be deduced from the fact that ‘additional funding’, the main chosen beneficiary of which is ‘the building’ has been selected by only a minority as one of the main three reasons for

Academy improvement. (Notably in their evaluation of the Academies' programme, PriceWaterhouseCoopers found 'the building' to be the second most chosen 'worst Academy feature' in students' views.)³³

Independence is instead seen to be the key to success:

'This is a brilliant programme [the Academy programme, giving heads the ability to innovate.] All our successes have been achieved in a horrible old building. Yorkshire and the Humber-based Academy

'The key is independence.' Yorkshire and the Humber-based Academy

'To be fair, as head of an LA [local authority] school, I generally did my best to avoid following LA dogma anyway, and "got away with it" because my work transformed the school.' Yorkshire and the Humber-based Academy

'It would be possible to achieve the same progress that the Academy has made in a school without Academy status, but it would be harder.' East Midlands-based Academy

In fact, even in relation to the school building, one principal commented that it was independence from the government's mainstream school building programme which had been a major attraction of 'conversion to' Academy status.

For us the capital funds for Academies were very important: PFIs are only interested in making money. I built a PFI school and it was a nightmare. As an educationalist it was disastrous and for the building company, well, they laughed all the way to the bank, at the tax-payers' expense. South East-based Academy

Similarly, the freedom to spend the '10 per cent which would go to the local authority' was also cited as a main positive of independence.

Several principals explicitly asserted that they do not think the Academy model itself is the key to success, including the Yorkshire and the Humber-based principal who agreed to be interviewed:

'There isn't a magic fix. Being an academy doesn't fix it. Clearly there are academies and sponsors that don't make a difference.'

'In the last [replaced] school it was very turbulent, there were many disaffected and disenfranchised pupils, the school was understaffed. Many of the classes were taught by supply teachers.

'It's not really about being an academy. Had we been a fresh start it wouldn't have been radically different. I do think that there needs to be a clean break, though, a fresh start.'

³³ Academies Evaluation, Fifth Annual Report, November 2008, Executive Summary, p15

A striking finding in the survey is the number of Academies that have a high proportion of teachers from the school which the Academy ‘replaced’. The majority of surveyed Academies have replaced a school, generally ones which were deemed to be failing (the notable exception being a City Technology College conversion). Over two-thirds of respondents reported that at least 50 per cent of their staff had moved over from the replaced school. This situation is in line with the DCSF’s employment policy for Academies which is deliberately designed to adhere to TUPE (Transfers of Undertakings) Regulations:

‘[T]he Department’s policy is that Academy projects which involve the closure of an existing school or the merger of two or more schools should be conducted on the basis that the TUPE Regulations apply, unless there are exceptional circumstances which render this inappropriate’.³⁴

Put very simply, TUPE regulations preserve the continuity of employment for existing staff.

This commitment to keeping staff on from a failing school is surprising because it seems to be somewhat anomalous with an improvement strategy which involved starting over. One would also imagine that a failing school related to poor teachers. However the impact of leadership, both in the case of Academies, and more generally in the current rhetoric, is considered to be powerful enough to turn around poor teaching.

The emphasis on leadership is echoed in the survey, with 73 per cent of the surveyed principals stating that ‘leadership’ has been the main factor in improvement. In light of the accompanying option choices in the questionnaire, leadership specifically denotes the role of the principal. Clearly the fact that the ‘leader’ themselves completed the questionnaire has significantly influenced its being chosen as the most commonly chosen ingredient for progress, nevertheless it is an interesting insight into principals’ perceptions, as are the accompanying quotes.

One principal at an Academy in the London region argues that it was her arrival, three years into the life of the Academy, rather than Academy status which generated improvement:

‘The change in leadership in Year 3 is the lever for change here. Prior to this it is hard to say that Academy status had little change – except in public perception – the new uniform and new name gave a positive feel to a failing school.’

If the Academies programme is truly to be rolled-out on a larger scale, the model with leadership as the linchpin may prove problematic. As a model for a ‘minority’ programme, the weight attached to leadership in the Academy model is considerably more plausible. For up to a maximum of say, 200 schools, it is perhaps viable for exceptional heads to be recruited to lead Academies. However, such an emphasis on leadership is not viable if Academies are to be rolled-out across the country. It is unrealistic to imagine that a large number of Academies will

³⁴ DCSF: Standards Site: Academies: FAQs: ‘Do Academies have problems finding new staff or encouraging staff to transfer from the predecessor school?’

be able to recruit – and retain – a large number of exceptional leaders (as the very term exceptional implies). Perhaps the more important issue however, is the question mark against the strength of institutions so heavily dependent on leadership. Such a model is inherently vulnerable because it is overly reliant on a single individual. The high attrition rate of principals, identified in PriceWaterhouseCoopers' evaluation, further compounds this notion of vulnerability.³⁵

A great deal of significance has also been attached to the role of the sponsors in Academies, leading to the suggestion that the sponsor's role in the leadership of the Academy is instrumental. Interestingly, the role of the sponsor in the improvement process came out as secondary in the survey. Only a minority of respondents see the sponsor as one of the main three factors in the improvement process. In terms of the contribution which the sponsors are considered to have, the most commonly chosen contributions are to the Academy's ethos and in bringing in outside expertise.

³⁵ Academies Evaluation, Fifth Annual Report, November 2008, Executive Summary, p8

Conclusion

Directly connected to the importance of Academies' 'independence', in the survey curricula freedoms were reported to be key in the Academy improvement process. (Curricula freedoms were both the most popular main and overall benefit of Academies' additional freedoms.) In relation to the curriculum, the scenario within the state education system has become highly problematic. In mainstream maintained schools there is far too much central prescription on what is taught, when it is taught and how it is taught. Policy for Academies, in turn, has gone too far to the other extreme. It is one thing to give schools freedom on how to teach subjects, it is quite another to give schools the freedom to get *rid* of subjects (and drop key stages).

Very welcome curricula flexibility, coupled with hugely unwelcome political pressure to achieve headline results, have risked putting Academies in the dangerous position of limiting the curriculum of many students. Tied to this scenario is the issue that vocational options offered to 14 year-olds are not of a satisfactory standard. Whilst a 'broad range of non-academic options' is welcomed by Ofsted in Academies' inspection reports³⁶ the reality is that students entered – and the evidence shows, potentially *co-opted* – into some of the vocational courses may be forfeiting a more useful and more challenging alternative.

To target Academies for potentially using weak vocational qualifications to bolster their results may seem unfair when this is also happening in other maintained – as well as private – schools. This is indeed a legitimate point, however: firstly, in the case of mainstream maintained schools there is no accompanying 'hype' about their rate of improvement. Academies by contrast are extolled as the 'vanguard' of school improvement and educational excellence. Furthermore, the aim, in theory at least, is for Academies to improve rather than diminish the life chances of their deprived targeted cohort. Secondly, in the case of mainstream maintained schools, information on the 'use' of vocational entries is available for public consumption. In the case of private schools, a) public funding is not involved, therefore the issue around transparency does not apply and b) parents can vote – or protest – with their feet and in fact, precisely for that reason, private schools do tend to publish their curricula/breakdown of GCSE entries and performance so that parents know what they are buying into.

Aside from the issue of which courses are being taken other strategies brought about by the immense focus on performance are leading to questionable practices in Academies: practices enabled by their comparative freedoms. Another concerning way in which results are being

³⁶ See examples of Academy Ofsted reports: The City Academy Bristol, December 2005; David Young Community Academy, February 2009.; Westminster Academy, June 2009, Ofsted: Inspection reports: http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxcare_providers/list/

bolstered is by targeting resources at ‘borderline’ pupils, as Kate Pretsell’s piece illustrates. Of related concern are so-called ‘booster’ strategies. Again, both ‘borderlining’ and booster classes are known to happen in mainstream maintained schools, but these strategies are not held as exemplary innovative improvement strategies which allow policy-makers to hold Academies up as beacons of excellence. Furthermore, without the freedoms and additional resources of Academies, mainstream maintained schools are unlikely to be able to implement such intensive ‘interventions’. The point is that if Academies’ GCSE results are better because they are exercising their freedom on strategies such as concentrating resources and teaching time on C/D borderline students who are likely to get the all important C (thereby hitting the A*-C bracket), and by ‘cramming’ then this is highly significant. Firstly, evidence suggests that a focus on borderline students can lead to other pupils being neglected.³⁷ Secondly, these ‘booster’ strategies are regarded as having limited educational value, failing to foster genuine understanding. As New Labour education adviser Michael Barber has argued: ‘[Booster classes]...don’t amount to a long-term improvement strategy.’³⁸

The evidence gathered in this survey demonstrates that the two principals who were asked do indeed ‘target’ students in this way:

‘We have been improving our maths performance with: the quality of teaching; significant levels of interventions and additionality – that’s weekend, after and before school classes, holiday classes, online support, tutorials; and focusing on the particular gaps in knowledge.

‘Reaching the floor target is a massive enterprise. But it’s important that young people should have that qualification.’ Yorkshire and the Humber-based Academy

‘Additionality’ is also a central strategy in another Yorkshire and the Humber-based Academy, as is starting the GCSE (and equivalent) curriculum a year early:

‘We do all of that – we do booster classes, after school classes, early entry for GCSE, so that students have the chance to repeat them in Year 11. Students start GCSE in Year 9, so Key Stage three is only two years long.’

It is highly plausible that if mainstream maintained schools, indeed even the ‘failing’ ones which Academies have replaced, were to start the GCSE syllabus a year early and spend large sums of money and time on out of school hours cramming, they too would get better results. (The fact that so many teachers are transferred from the schools which Academies replace, as illustrated in

³⁷ Research on the side effects of ‘borderlining’: Gillborn, D., and Youdell, D., *Rationing Education*, Oxford University Press, 2002; Boyle, B. And Bragg, J. ‘What a waste of money!’ University of Manchester, 2006

³⁸ Pyke, N., ‘Schools focus on D-grades to boost rankings,’ *Times Education Supplement*, 22nd November 1996 in Reed, J., and Hallgarten, J., ‘Time to Say Goodbye? The Future of Performance Tables,’ IPPR, 2003

the survey, adds to the argument that such ‘conditions’ in Academies are conducive to better exam performance.) Would these mainstream schools have been considered exemplary and pioneering?

Add to this, as evidence suggests is happening at least in some Academies, the added advantage of an ‘improved’ intake on the grounds of what a Yorkshire and the Humber-based Academy principal refers to as the ‘halo effect’, and the Academy model itself looks distinctly less impressive.

‘People say that the intake has changed because the number of pupils on free school meals has gone down, but we’re still serving the local community. The pupils are the same, they’re still the local pupils. There are more and more local children in the school now. The parents of children who had previously made the decision to take their children elsewhere are now stopping here. We still have the same deprived intake but we have more local children.’

Arrangements – from sponsors to buildings to capital expenditure – vary considerably, the only consistent similarity between Academies today is their greater autonomy. With the main financial boons to being an Academy set to be dropped from 2011, the Labour government must believe that it is the added freedoms rather than the extra capital which lies at the heart of the Academy programme’s success. A prospective Conservative government also appears to share this view.

However the bottom line is this: knowing so little about what is happening in Academies, why – as well as the all important *if* – they are successful, it is impossible to make a sound judgement on them. PriceWaterhouseCoopers, concluded in their final evaluation of the Academies’ programme (November 2008) that ‘There is insufficient evidence to make a definitive judgment about academies as a model of school improvement.’³⁹ However, in the case of subject-level exam results this is not because the evidence is not there but because it has not been scrutinised. Whilst the government has expressly asked us to judge Academies on their results, we are being expressly prevented from doing so.

It is imagined that the curricula freedoms granted to Academies are fostering innovative and responsive approaches to students’ needs. It is *not* imagined that the curricula freedoms granted to Academies are fostering schools which drop entire subjects. The freedoms granted to Academies should be allowing them to serve their students rather than Whitehall. However the pernicious coupling of immunity to scrutiny with heavy-handed political pressure for immediate impact on league-table performance is potentially disastrous. There are undoubtedly Academies

³⁹ Academies Evaluation, Fifth Annual Report, November 2008, p19

which are serving their students very well, offering them excellent curricula and excellent teaching. Without the requisite transparency, however, it is difficult to know which these Academies are and for fair judgements to be made. This is only preliminary research, the scope of which has been limited. However, even the restricted insight which it has given into the secrecy of Academies reinforces the urgent need for further research with the necessary information made available.

It is highly likely that Academies will find themselves subject to the Freedom of Information Act in the future. However, we cannot wait until the Freedom of Information Act applies to find out about the subjects Academies are doing and which they are dropping. Instead, Academies must be required to submit their GCSE and equivalent results, broken down by subject, to the Department of Children, Schools and Families, which will then publish them in a uniform way. Ultimately, however, transparency through legal coercion should not be a requirement when public money and students' education are involved. The Academies' programme should be, and should always have been, fully open. Particularly in a time when public spending is being cut it is highly irresponsible to roll-out a programme for which a convincing case has yet to be made.

We want to be sure that, in Ed Balls' words, Academies 'break the link between poverty and attainment'⁴⁰ – *not* the link between poverty and academic learning.

Specific Recommendations

- DCSF to collect all Academies' GCSE and equivalent results by subject, by January 2010
- Extension of Academies' programme halted until evidence from GCSE and equivalent performance scrutinised
- Academies made subject to the Freedom of Information Act

⁴⁰ "“No excuses” on school results,' *BBC News Online*, 10th June 2008