

## Introduction

When the first few academies were opened ten years ago, they were promoted as the way to improve opportunities for disadvantaged young people in schools with very low attainment. It is clear that the present Secretary of State for Education expects academy status to be the norm for secondary schools, and subsequently for most primary schools, special schools and pupil referral units (PRUs). The ambition of raising qualification levels for disadvantaged students has become a bridgehead for a shift from local authority control to privatised governance.

It is argued by Government and Department for Education representatives that:

- i) academies have replaced ‘underperforming’ schools serving the most deprived communities;
- ii) the poorest pupils make faster progress in academies than other state schools;
- iii) once well established, academies provide GCSE success across a broad curriculum;
- iv) major sponsors governing chains of academies are particularly effective.

This report deals with these claims and concludes that the evidence does not support them.

It has been argued that academy status is important to free schools from local authority ‘control’. There are two myths here: that local authorities still have extensive powers, and that direct control by central Government and its agencies – a consequence of academy status – is somehow more helpful or benign. The evidence in this report suggests that academy heads may have been under even greater pressure than those of other schools to raise attainment scores by adopting alternative and easier qualifications to GCSEs, *at whatever cost to a broad and balanced curriculum*. In many academies this has produced a spurious improvement in results to satisfy the political masters, but with questionable benefit to students.

### *Dealing with the myths*

This investigation adds to the growing body of research into England’s academies and similar schemes (US charter schools and Swedish free schools) which concludes that they have not led to real improvement but have damaging consequences to standards and social cohesion. (See, for example, Lubienski and Lubienski 2006, or CREDO 2009, for charter schools; Lundahl 2011 for a summary of the Swedish research.)

It is difficult to believe that politicians do not know this. Despite its positive tone, the most recent National Audit Office report *The Academies Programme* (2010), lodged in the House of Commons Library, is unable to identify an ‘*academies effect*’ (p20) but rather *considerable variability* (p18). It shows that *disadvantaged pupils and those with lower levels of prior*

*attainment do no better in academies than elsewhere (pp 6 and 27-8), and that the apparent success of academies is in large part due to their reliance on alternative qualifications to GCSE (pp21-2).*

This is not to question the dedication and skills of the many fine teachers working in academies. Nor would we wish to deny that there are many good schools with academy status, or indeed that some of the school leaders are bringing about worthwhile development or innovation. The issue is one of governance: whether academy status in general is more likely to produce successful schools. The final PriceWaterhouseCooper (PWC) evaluation in November 2008 informed the previous Government that they could find no ‘academy effect’ but rather ‘a more complex and varied process of change’. That message was, unfortunately, ignored. The more extensive data now available supports the PWC conclusion.

We would not wish to minimise the importance of improving qualifications and opportunities for the many young people whose lives are damaged by poverty. However, we cannot find in the statistics anything to suggest that academies are the answer, and they may indeed serve as a distraction from the real issues.

#### *A critical approach*

In conducting this research, it has often been clear that surface appearances can be deceptive and that more detailed and critical investigation is needed in order to see the patterns and make a fairer evaluation. We have raised questions such as whether ‘equivalents’ to GCSE A\*-C grades are distorting attainment statistics, how well more disadvantaged students are performing, whether particular academies are successful once you control for different patterns of KS2 attainment. We have looked into whether multi-academy sponsors are particularly effective, and whether longer established academies are more successful.

Every effort has been made to ensure that our conclusions are based on secure evidence. We welcome questions and challenges to our use and interpretation of data, as well as comments and further information, from critics as well as those who broadly support our findings.

Dr Terry Wrigley, Leeds Metropolitan University

Dr Afroditi Kalambouka, University of Manchester