

## **Education Statements and Quality Assessment in the UK**

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### **Historical perspective for the UK**

Prior to the educational reforms of the late 1980's, schools operated in a climate of very high levels of professional autonomy with little accountability. There was no objective assessment of school outcomes against any notion of national norms, there were highly variable and locally determined curriculum. With very little central control, education could be, and was, characterised as the 'secret garden' of teachers. There was little or no accountability to parents and certainly no real notion of students or parents as clients. Engagement in higher education was limited to the top 20% of the total school population, following largely highly academic courses and participation was closely associated with secure socio-economic status. There were real, but largely unacknowledged issues with the comparative performance of ethnic minority groups and disadvantaged communities, alongside extreme gender differences.

Initial reforms brought a move towards a nationally defined curriculum, based on notions of educational entitlement rooted in egalitarian ideology, resulting in specification of both what is to be taught and at what age. The National Curriculum was introduced incrementally, following compulsory training for teachers, and was accompanied by measurement of expected outcomes at defined ages/stages of development. Increased accountability was accompanied by delegation of funding to schools, allowing a greater degree of local decision-making on deployment of funds in response to local need. Further reforms brought closely defined curricula in the core areas of English, Mathematics and Science, for the first time defining not only content but pedagogic methodology, as a strategy to assure entitlement to consistent quality.

The new inspection regime (Ofsted – Office for Standards in Education) was introduced in the early 90's, for the first time establishing a

common framework for the assessment of quality of schools. Results are published and universally available, bringing a high degree of responsibility and accountability for school leaders. In the early years, a large number of schools were found to be 'failing' with high-stakes consequences for their leaders. Schools are inspected on a 4-year cycle by a team of trained and authorised inspectors, The overall focus is on the quality of lessons, assessed through observation, progress of students, supported by examination of work, and feedback from students and parents on the broader activities of the school. Key issues are identified and the school produces an action plan to address these.

In itself, the Inspection regime has undoubtedly raised both awareness of the expected quality standards and the understanding by school leaders of their responsibility in ensuring that they manage schools to meet those standards. Subsequent years of inspection revealed far fewer schools failing, and less with serious weaknesses. The focus of the inspectorate has more recently been on encouraging schools to undertake regular, rigorous self-assessment and raising the standard of their development planning to address issues which are of concern nationally.

However, since the system is intrinsically diagnostic rather than therapeutic, the responsibility for implementation of school improvement lies with the leaders and teachers of each school. Issues of quality assurance in their skills are central to the overall progress of the school.

By the late 90's, schools were required to set institutional targets targets for examination results; the publication of these as national 'league tables' has developed over time to include assessments at age 7, 11, 14, 16 and 18. In 1998, the Government initiated centrally determined targets as further encouragement to raise standards.

Many aspects of the 'core curriculum and standard assessment' approach are reflected in practice for many countries; it is essentially quantitative and vulnerable in a number of aspects currently causing concern in the UK.

1. The pursuit of 'target' results encourages teachers to focus on the 50% of students who fall within normal range of inherent intelligence and capability, and hence limits the achievement of both the most able and those in need of greater support
2. There is also a tendency to concentrate teaching on those areas of intelligence on which the standard attainment tests focus and in which progress can most easily be measured quantitatively, eg. linguistic, mathematical, and ignore more creative avenues such as kinaesthetic, musical, social

3. By focusing on curriculum (input) and achievement (outcome) it ignores the fundamental issue of quality of teaching (process)
4. Annual targets, based on the notion that continuous improvement is possible, without addressing the fundamental issue of teacher capability has led to low morale in the profession, with an associated lack of willingness to engage in improvement activity – a central issue of engaging ‘hearts and minds’ in the reform process
5. Specifically, the stipulation of preferred pedagogic approaches has been contentious; whilst many teachers would acknowledge the effectiveness of the approach, there has been considerable resentment of what is seen as an infringement of professional discretion, traditionally an area which was not subject to central control or direction.
6. Schools in the UK are not homogenous, local factors have a major impact on the availability of students for learning, and as yet we have insufficient knowledge about the underlying reasons for differential performance between schools in similarly challenging circumstances. However, there is very clear evidence that the issues of quality of leadership and quality of teaching are central to raising standards.

Current Strategies for the assessment/assurance of quality in leadership and teaching

Recognition of this central importance of consistent quality in teachers has led to a range of policy implementation covering all stages of the profession.

The recent establishment of a National College for School Leadership has drawn together national expertise to support the training and development of leaders both at institutional and subject level. The development of a framework of qualifications for serving and prospective headteachers has given greater emphasis to the formal training of school leaders in the required skills and given some impetus to assurance of quality. The inclusion of a similar framework for subject leaders acknowledges the central role of responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning standards in their specialist areas. However, since all of these qualifications are currently not mandatory for appointment to post, the proportion of applicants holding suitable qualifications is still too low to assure that all new appointments have undergone training. Shortage of applicants for senior posts further aggravates this difficulty, and plans to make such qualifications mandatory and still to be fully implemented.

The National body for accreditation of teacher training, the TTA, implements a rigorous programme of inspection of initial training by Higher Education institutions, for the purposes of ensuring consistent quality for entrants to the profession. HE institutions are regularly graded in terms of their overall quality, and this information is widely available to prospective applicants and employers. Where an institution is found to be falling below required standards, their capacity to offer training may be reduced or withheld.

Increasingly, schools themselves are licensed to offer training to graduates under the supervision of an accrediting body; this offers considerable advantages for recruitment in terms of payment while training, enhanced practical experience and the opportunity for trainees to spend extended time observing high quality practitioners in addition to theoretical studies. The programme for initial trainees has been extensively revised in recent years to encompass a range of new skills, including the use of Information Technology to enhance teaching and learning. Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) join schools with a professional portfolios identifying their skills and further training needs; the school is responsible for ensuring that they undergo suitable induction, mentoring and further professional development during the first year of service.

Historically, once teachers had passed beyond the initial 'induction' year, there were few real measures of effectiveness. Where performance could be shown to be unsatisfactory, there has always been the recourse of procedures for support or ultimately dismissal, but in reality, many teachers had little incentive to improve performance, particularly when they had been serving long enough to reach the top of the pay structure, and salary increases were dependent on assuming additional responsibility.

The introduction in 2000 of a national scheme inviting all established teachers to be assessed against an agreed 'Threshold' framework defining the required level of performance has resulted in over 250,000 teachers making a detailed application, supported by evidence. This is initially assessed by their own headteachers and then is subject to verification by an external assessor before agreeing that the teacher has performed at a level to qualify for additional annual salary. The external verification process is rigorous, and includes a visit to all schools in England, some 22,000. As a result, there is much greater agreement and consistency about teaching standards right across the profession, and the further development of standards is facilitated, since the extrinsic motivation of increased salary has proved much more effective than exhortation or rhetoric. Meeting published standards for curriculum delivery and student performance are central to

satisfactory performance at this 'Threshold' level, and hence the mechanism is of crucial importance in national quality assurance.

Since 2000, all teachers are additionally subject to a system of Performance Management, requiring them to be observed whilst teaching, at least annually, by senior managers, participate in a discussion of their professional conduct and to progress towards measurable targets agreed in support of the school development plan. This system was implemented with the specific aim of ensuring greater quality and consistency; more recently there have been indications that there is the intention to link this directly with progression on the national pay scales, with progression dependent on satisfactory performance.

Headteachers are also subject to Performance Management, but in their case, salary progression is absolutely dependent on meeting targets agreed with their Governing Bodies, again supported by an External Advisor trained to support Governors in critically appraising the professional performance of the Headteacher. The issues of monitoring teacher performance and teaching standards are obligatory within this assessment, further supporting the policy aims of accountability and consistency of approach.

### **Cumulative policy effect**

When viewed as two alternative approaches, inspection as regulation and encouraging conformance to an agreed model with teacher quality driven through enhanced training and additional reward for meeting standards, the cumulative policy effect is to create a dynamic tension between coercion and encouragement. National analysis reveals that measurable outputs in terms of educational standards have risen significantly, with less variability in performance across schools and greater consistency of approach and practice. There is undoubtedly a greater acceptance of the legitimate role of Government in monitoring educational standards and developing policy to ensure that education plays its central role in forming national success. The challenge now is to engage the teaching profession fully in ensuring that those standards are maintained through the exercise of autonomous professional activity, characterised in political terms as 'trusting' the teaching profession.

The recent introduction of programmes to involve trained headteachers directly in the inspection regime through the 'Headstart' programme, establishment of Advanced Skills teachers with a brief to improve the skills of their peers and increasing numbers of serving

Headteachers as Threshold Assessors and External Advisors working directly with schools to improve practice demonstrates the changing policy focus from reform towards evolution.

### **Pendulum swing for quality assessment**

1980's

High professional autonomy

Low accountability

1990's

Little professional autonomy

High accountability

2000's

High professional autonomy

High accountability

### **Future directions**

School self-evaluation demonstrating high quality, evidence-based assessment of quality and planning for development. May lead to 'licence' or quality mark from Ofsted which recognises that the school has the capacity to operate with increasing autonomy

Establishment of professional portfolios for all staff, building evidence base and supporting engagement in higher study to improve practice and engage in small-scale research on school improvement

Absolute expectation for teachers to demonstrate continuous improvement in their pedagogical skills and contribution to school ethos and progress

Increasing role of 'training schools' in the preparation of both classroom teachers and leaders, Advanced Skills teachers heavily involved in the training of other leading teachers

Requirement for those involved in initial teacher training to refresh their own classroom skills and knowledge of current curriculum practice in order to remain fully effective