



## **Debate Paper Three: Structures, Admissions and Accountability**

January 2014

## The role of the market in education

Thirty years ago, everyone used to use British Telecom for their phone service – unless by chance you lived in Hull, which had its own network. It was an era of monopolies when the local gas and electricity board supplied your energy, the government owned British Airways and the council ran the buses. At that time, nearly all state schools were in the control of the local authority or the church – apart from 160 or so grammar schools directly funded by the government. Today as marketisation and consumerism have taken hold in public life and public policy the picture is completely different.

The market plays less of a role in education than it does in some other services. However, two big themes that have underpinned the market reforms in other sectors have been applied to schooling: greater freedom and autonomy for those leading and running schools; and increased diversity and choice for parents when deciding which school to send their children to.

## Greater freedom and autonomy

The journey to school autonomy has not been straightforward; sometimes reforms started by one government have been reversed by the next. Some measures, such as local management of schools, have been universal and applied to all schools, while others such as sponsored academies have been targeted on particular pupils and schools. Some steps have been welcomed by school leaders, such as greater control over school budgets and autonomy to deal with teacher capability issues, while others have been more divisive, such as the introduction of grant maintained and free schools.

Although increased autonomy remains an education priority for all parties, there is a notable tension between autonomy on the one hand and accountability measures on the other. Many school and college leaders and other stakeholders are beginning to question to what extent the current reality of autonomy matches the political rhetoric. Some argue that Ofsted's most recent inspection policy has led to a reduction in autonomy, compounded by increased pressure from the Department for Education (DfE), academy chains and governors to improve results quickly. They would also argue that the government's manipulation of performance indicators and floor targets to drive practice has reduced autonomy in regards to curriculum design and classroom practice. This is leading to questions about the extent to which schools really have increased autonomy, or whether schools in fact now have less autonomy than in previous years.

**Figure 1: Developments in school autonomy over the past 25 years**

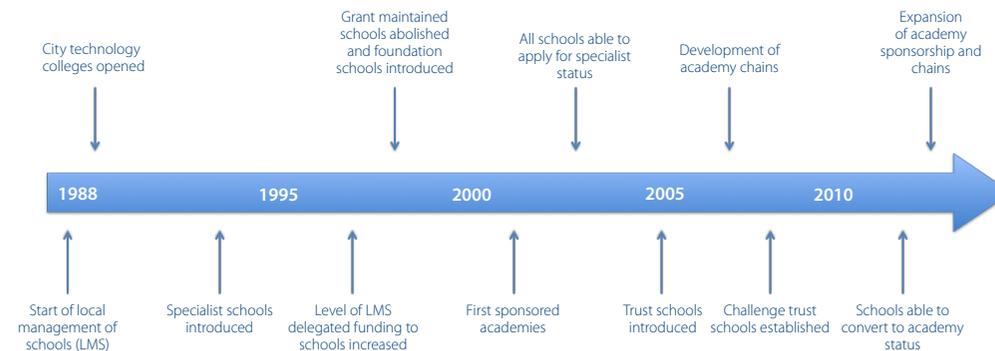


Figure 1 charts the twists and turns in the journey towards greater autonomy. The current government sees academies as the main vehicle for providing schools with the freedoms they need to innovate, organise learning and improve educational outcomes in the way they think best.

At the beginning of 2014, around two-thirds of secondary schools are academies – or planning to become academies. In the primary sector, where the process of academisation only started in 2010, only around 15 per cent of schools are academies or are on the road to academy status.

The freedoms for academies mainly relate to the freedom to decide the organisation of the school day and school year, draw up admission criteria<sup>1</sup>, determine the content of the school curriculum, design their own governance arrangements, appoint (or remove) the head and other staff, employ unqualified teachers and set pay and conditions of service. The independent Academies Commission set up by the Royal Society of Arts and the Pearson Think Tank<sup>2</sup> found that it was not so much the specific freedoms that mattered –

which were not so very different from what schools could do in any event. It was the overall 'sense of liberation' that many academy leaders valued. Academy status provided headteachers with "the permission to

<sup>1</sup> Subject to complying with the Schools Admission and Special Educational Needs Codes of Practice

<sup>2</sup> RSA and Pearson, 2013, *Unleashing Greatness, Getting the Best from an Academised System* the Report of the Academies Commission

make changes that might not have been possible as maintained schools”.

Critics argue that there is a downside to academisation. They say that some academies have altered their admission arrangements to provide themselves with a more favourable student intake. They describe how schools’ independence from the local authority has increased competition and eroded collaboration between schools in some areas as each institution strives to improve its own position. They argue that the drive for autonomy has led to the general fragmentation of the system and weakened links with local communities.

Despite these views the principle of autonomy and, potentially, the role of the market looks set to become more rather than less entrenched in English education – whichever party wins the next election. The Labour Party has said that all schools will be able to access academy freedoms and the Conservative Party has said that they support the concept of introducing for-profit schools.

### The impact of autonomy on school improvement

How far has autonomy contributed to school improvement? The Academies Commission found that the autonomy linked to the introduction of academies had “provided much-needed vitality to the school system” but were more equivocal about the gains in attainment. This caution is borne out by the DfE’s own analysis for 2011 and 2012 which shows that results in sponsored academies were marginally higher than in a

group of similar schools and improved at a faster rate, but were lower when GCSE equivalent qualifications were excluded from the analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Reaching definitive conclusions on this issue is difficult because it is hard to disentangle the value that academisation specifically adds, given that often academies also access more general school improvement programmes. And some previously poorly performing schools in disadvantaged areas have done just as well as those that went down the academy route. In addition, academies are not a homogenous group: there are sponsored academies, those that are in chains or federations, and stand-alone converter academies, all working with varying degrees of autonomy.

However, two trends are worth mentioning. First, sponsored academies tend to deliver greater levels of pupil progress, as measured by value added scores, the longer they have been open – though given their lower starting point for improvement they arguably have the potential for making greater gains. Second, there is considerable variation in

performance between academies – with some sponsored academies making good progress in terms of improvements in attainment and some being declared inadequate by Ofsted. As the Academies Commission put it, the move to academy status itself is not “an automatic route to school improvement”.

Variation in performance also characterises the performance of academy chains – overall they outperform free-standing sponsored academies but there are big differences both within and between chains. This variability is also a feature of charter schools in the United States of America (US), which operate on principles similar to academies but have been established over a longer period. Figure 2 compares the performance of charter school students with comparable students educated in traditional public schools (TPS) in 27 states of the USA. The results in the table represent an improvement on a similar analysis conducted in 2009 and show that in some areas charter schools are performing more strongly than comparable local schools but this is far from being the picture overall. Freedom by itself is not a sufficient guarantor of school success.

**Figure 2: The performance of charter schools compared to their local markets in 27 states of the USA**

	Worse progress than comparable students	Progress no different from comparable students	Better progress than comparable students
Reading	19%	56%	25%
Mathematics	31%	40%	29%

Source: Centre for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013, National Charter School Study, Stanford University

3 DfE, 2013, *Attainment by Pupils in Academies 2012: Supplementary Analysis to the Academies Annual Report 2011-12* and RSA and Pearson, op cit

This chimes with the message from research more generally, which suggests that autonomy needs to be accompanied by other factors if it is to be an effective lever of school improvement<sup>4</sup> including:

- the publication of external tests and exams at key points so that schools are held to account for how they use their autonomy
- providing school leaders with access to training, support and guidance to help them to use their autonomy to innovate in a disciplined and effective way and
- the distribution of leadership responsibilities, particularly in respect of the business management of schools, so that principals and other senior school leaders can stay focused on leading teaching and learning and avoid the role overload that increased autonomy might otherwise generate

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) analysis of the 2012 PISA results also makes some important points about the value of autonomy. The OECD has always been clear that high levels of school autonomy correlate well with system success, providing that there is robust accountability and transparency in terms of performance data for schools. The 2012 analysis adds two further conditions for autonomy to be successful in raising standards.

First, there needs to be strong understanding across the system of what is required to attain a given qualification in terms both of content to be studied and level which needs to be reached. Second, autonomy is most successful when teachers in

schools have a strong sense of involvement in the educational management of the school, are involved in educational decisions and understand the issues behind them. It would be possible to argue that in the UK we have the high levels of accountability and the transparent availability of data, but we do not yet have that widely shared understanding of standards nor the strong levels of teacher participation which more successful autonomy-based systems enjoy.

### Questions

- What should the balance between autonomy and external control look like?
- There is a tension between encouraging school autonomy on the one hand and promoting academy chains on the other. What can be done to mitigate the risk that some academy chains may inhibit innovation by locking down the system into rigid structures?
- Has the emphasis on schools and school leaders being free to run their own affairs, overall, been a good thing for students? Has it generated more advantages than disadvantages?
- If it has, what has made the difference? Is it a specific freedom or the general sense of being in control and being responsible?
- Are there enough checks on how schools use their freedoms? Should they be more accountable to parents and local people?
- Is it possible for competition and collaboration to be happy bedfellows in the education system? Can we better balance giving schools

responsibility for their own performance with encouraging them to work together to raise standards for all the children in an area? If so, how?

- Should the government fund for-profit schools?

### Increased diversity

The move towards schools becoming more diverse started with the creation of city technology colleges in 1989 and picked up pace in 1992 when the first specialist schools were introduced. Higher performing secondary schools were financially incentivised to adopt a particular specialism as a way of carving out a distinct identity for their school in the belief that this would broaden parental choice. For some specialisms, schools were allowed to select up to ten per cent of their pupils on their basis of their aptitude for the school's area of specialism. The thinking behind this move was justified by the government of the day in the following terms:

*"Uniformity in educational provision presupposes that children are all basically the same and that local communities have essentially the same educational needs. The reality is that children have different needs. The provision of education should be geared more to local circumstances and individual needs: hence our commitment to diversity in education"* (DfE 1992)

The move to greater diversity was underpinned by including within the 1988 Education Act the right for parents to express a preference for the school their child should attend. This provision came to have greater force as during the 1990s and the first decade of the new century successive governments funded schools on the basis of the places they filled,

<sup>4</sup> You can find a list of research reports and evidence relating to autonomy and school improvement on the ASCL Great Education Debate website: [www.greateducationdebate.org.uk](http://www.greateducationdebate.org.uk)

**Figure 3: Free schools, studio schools and university technical colleges**

A **free school** is a non-selective school that operates independently within the state system. They are promoted by teachers, groups of parents, other schools or education charities. Free schools operate in the same way as academies and receive public funding according to the number of pupils they attract. Like academies, they have to abide by the Schools Admissions Code 2012 and by the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice and are able to develop their own curriculum, subject to offering a broad and balanced curriculum including mathematics, English and science. They are also subject to inspection by Ofsted.

The first 24 free schools opened in September 2011 and by September 2013 174 were up and running. A further 102 free schools have been approved to open in 2014.

**Studio schools** are set up with the backing of local businesses and employers and offer a new model of 14-19 education for students of all abilities. They typically have a maximum of around 300 pupils, and deliver both academic and vocational qualifications through project-based learning and enterprise projects. The essential elements are employability and enterprise skills; key qualifications, including mathematics and English; a personalised curriculum; practical learning; and real work.

As of September 2013, 28 studio schools were open and 13 have been approved to open in 2014 and beyond.

**University technical colleges** (UTCs) are academies for 14 to 19 year-olds that specialise in subjects needing modern, technical, industry-standard equipment, such as engineering and construction. They teach these disciplines alongside business skills and the use of ICT. Students integrate academic study with practical learning, studying core GCSEs and A levels alongside technical qualifications.

UTCs, typically have 500 to 800 students and are sponsored by universities, local employers and further education colleges with strengths in the UTC's specialist subject areas. As of September 2013, 17 UTCs were open and 28 had been approved to open by ministers.

made it easier for popular schools to expand and opened up the specialist school programme to all secondary schools. Local authorities were required to hold competitions for new schools to encourage new providers to run schools and academies were enabled to set up sixth forms.

The coalition government has placed even more emphasis on school diversity with its programmes to establish free schools, studio schools and university technical colleges – see Figure 3.

It is too early to evaluate the impact of this diversification strategy on the school system.

Champions of greater diversity argue that it is bringing innovation and dynamism and making education providers more responsive to parental concerns and wishes. Competition will force poor educational providers to up their game or depart the scene. They also highlight how studio schools and UTCs are drawing universities and employers into working with schools and so strengthening the link between education and the worlds of employment and higher education.

Critics on the other hand argue that diversity has brought with it a number of negative effects. They say

that scarce capital spending is going on establishing new schools in areas where there is not an issue with school standards and there is no shortage of places or, even worse, there is a surplus of places. They also point to how an injection of extra places can destabilise collaboration, encourage schools to alter admissions criteria to favour more able students and generally make schools more competitive in their approach to each other. This in turn undermines collaborative efforts to raise standards for all children in an area. Their essential argument is that diversity leads to fragmentation of the school system with the inevitable result that while some schools may thrive and others will struggle. Children's education, they believe, should not be at the mercy of market forces and schools should be incentivised to contribute to improving all schools in a locality. And critics of the 14-19 initiatives say that 14 is too young for young people to specialise in educational routes linked to specific employment sectors.

### Questions

- How far has diversity brought welcome innovation and competition to the system?

- Should there be more controls on the quality and operation of free schools?
- Are 14-19 studio schools a useful addition to the school system or the thin end of thick wedge leading to an unhealthy division between academic and vocational education?
- To what extent has innovation and diversity come at the expense of overlooking the needs of parents who do not know how the admissions systems work or who cannot afford to move house or change catchment area?
- Should the education quasi-market be better regulated, with a view to minimising some of the negative effects of the unregulated market? If so, how?

### Reconceptualising learning

Finally, there is a wider question about whether the structural changes currently being considered, debated and tested are radical enough to shape an education service for the 21st century.

For instance, today's students have grown up with digital media in a way that makes it almost as natural as breathing. For education, this opens up possibilities for visualisation and virtual worlds, collaborative discovery, creating shared web content, providing and discussing feedback online, letting students engage in peer review and having more open questioning and discussion – among students themselves, with their teacher and, via the web, with a wider audience. This does not require the confines of a classroom or even a normal school day.

In addition, neurological research is giving us a whole new understanding of young people's development. One thing it tells us is that chemical changes in the developing brain mean that teenagers function

better later in the day. Academies have been given the power to alter drastically the timetable of the school day and week, as well as the school year, yet very few have gone down this route. There are other implications of brain research on the way the school day is structured. It could be argued that we are still not making full use of what we know about young people's development in order to create a learning environment that enhances their learning potential.

Some would say that the recent changes that have been implemented do little more than tinker with existing structures rather than reconceptualising what an education service might look like. Such a way of thinking would debate much more fundamental issues such as the very definition of a school or college, the nature and locus of the virtual and physical classroom, the timing of the year and day and much more.

### Questions

- To what extent is the existing definition of school or college as a physical space an outmoded concept?
- Is the existing definition of school terms and year still relevant?
- Should schools (and the way they are held to account) be organised based on the age of students?
- What should a place of learning look like in the 21st century?
- Should the role of technology be to drive or support independent learning?

### Sources for the evidence on autonomy and school improvement

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