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An analysis of examination uptake and performance of schools in the Academies programme

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Background

The original intention of the government's academies programme was to take 'failing' secondary schools in deprived areas, hand much of the control over to a sponsor, and give them extra funding, new buildings and leadership, all with the intention of breaking the cycle of underachievement and low aspirations in the school and the area. Some new academy schools have also been built in deprived areas where more school places were required.

Over time, the criterion has shifted somewhat so that different types of schools have become eligible to convert to academies. Currently any school which fails to get 30% of its pupils achieving 5 A* to C grades at GCSE including English and maths is eligible, whatever the level of deprivation experienced by pupils. City Technology Colleges and independent schools can also apply to become academies, and these are likely to be high achieving schools.

By September 2009, there were 200 academy schools open, with plans for another 100 to be open by September 2010 and a commitment by the government to an eventual total of 400 (DCSF, 2009).

Research Questions

This paper looks at three different aspects of academy schools:

- 1) The characteristics of the schools converting to academies
- 2) The uptake of individual GCSE and A-level subjects
- 3) The performance of pupils in individual GCSEs and A-levels

In each of the three areas we summarise the data in all academies together, and then undertake further analysis of changes over time. We look at whether the characteristics of the schools converting to academies have changed, and whether improvements in uptake and attainment in core subjects were seen after conversion.

Methods

The Government commissioned evaluations of the academies programme have on the whole been mildly favourable (e.g. PricewaterhouseCoopers [PwC], 2008). In terms of attainment both PwC (2008) and the National Audit Office (2007) report improvements in the performance of academies in comparison to their predecessor schools at GCSE level, and that this improvement is faster than that in schools similar to the predecessor in terms of ability.

Other analysis is less favourable. Several authors note that any improvements in academies need to be put in the context of changes in the intake of these schools in terms of the percentages of deprived pupils (Gorard, 2009; Curtis et al, 2008). For example, Curtis et al report that the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals in academies fell from 45.3% in 2003 to 29% in 2008.

This paper differs from previous research by looking at the uptake and attainment in individual subjects, rather than summaries of overall performance. It also uses what is generally considered to be a better measure of deprivation than the free school meal indicator (the Income Deprivation

Affecting Children Index (IDACI)), to calculate a mean level of deprivation experienced by pupils in each academy.

The majority of the academies have only opened in the last two years, which is probably not long enough for any effect of conversion to have filtered through to uptake or results in these schools. Thus, it was decided to only undertake analysis of uptake and attainment in the academies opened in 2006 or before.

Frame

For the data analysis academy schools (and proposed conversions) were identified from a list on the DCSF website. Uptake and attainment data were taken from the National Pupil Databases (NPD) for 2004-2008. A measure of prior attainment was also calculated for pupils taking exams in academies, to determine if the make-up of pupils has changed over time. The NPD from 2007 was used to calculate the mean deprivation within each academy using the IDACI measure.

Research findings

Analysis of the characteristics of converting schools suggests that the majority are poorly performing or underachieving schools, although they are not always in the most deprived areas. Further, whilst the deprivation levels of pupils are generally higher than average, there has been a slight decline in this measure in schools converting more recently and in the proposed conversions.

In terms of uptake and performance we argue that there is too much variation in the data between schools for a clear picture to emerge. However, pupils in academies were generally well below average in terms of their prior attainment. Therefore, it is not surprising that we found the uptake of and attainment in core subjects at GCSE and A-level in these schools was also below average in general. Uptake and attainment levels in academies as a whole have generally been increasing since the first few opened, but this may be a consequence of an increase in the ability levels of pupils in academies, rather than a direct result of schools converting.

Claims are repeatedly made about the success (e.g. DCSF, 2009) or otherwise (e.g. Gorard, 2009) of the academies programme. The conclusion from this study is that it is probably still too early to determine whether the programme has been a success. Further research may help to shed light on this question, once a larger number of academies have been open long enough to have had an impact.