



The role and performance of Ofsted

SCORE's response to the Education Select Committee inquiry

October 2010

About SCORE

SCORE is a partnership of six organisations, which aims to improve science education in UK schools and colleges by supporting the development and implementation of effective education policy. The partnership is currently chaired by Professor Graham Hutchings FRS and comprises the Association for Science Education, Institute of Physics, Royal Society, Royal Society of Chemistry, Science Council and Society of Biology.

The SCORE partnership welcomes the opportunity to submit a response to the House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry on the role and purpose of Ofsted. Our response highlights the importance of subject specific inspections as part of the role of Ofsted in providing an accountability mechanism. The response strongly recommends that:

- Ofsted continues as an inspection system which is able to hold schools and colleges to account. However it should shift its emphasis more towards improving teaching and learning in both the inspected schools and colleges and across the system as a whole, including initial teacher education (ITE). Effective Ofsted inspections of ITE are crucial to ensure (and enhance) the impact of a high quality workforce.
- Ofsted increases the number of subject specific inspections to provide statistically useful data on the impact of policies, structures and initiatives in school departments.
- The inspection process is drawn from a wide range of evidence, including subject specific inspections and should not focus exclusively on very narrow measures (such as 5 A*-C at GCSE).
- Ofsted inspections provide a national, strategic view of the teaching and learning of schools and colleges. This is increasingly important in an environment where schools and colleges are experiencing a higher level of independence. For this reason, SCORE recommends all schools are subject to continued and regular inspection regardless of their previous performance ratings.

The purposes of inspection

1. The education system, and its inspection infrastructure, should be designed to help children's learning. We need an inspection system which still holds schools to account but also shifts its emphasis to improving teaching and learning in both the inspected schools and colleges and across the system as a whole.
2. The case for a direct link between the present system of inspection and an improvement in children's learning has yet to be made. Some schools and college identified as failing have gone on to improve, but others have not. Some schools and colleges which have been identified as good have then got worse.
3. It is Ofsted's role to carry out rigorous, fair and representative inspections and, based on the evidence from these inspections, provide qualitative and quantitative feedback to schools and colleges that improve their teaching and learning. Furthermore, Ofsted should collect sufficient evidence at both subject and institutional level across the education system to find and disseminate good practice and to inform policy.
4. In an environment where more schools and colleges are experiencing a higher level of independence, it is particularly important that there is a national, strategic view and measure of the quality of teaching and learning in schools and colleges. In particular, we feel that all schools should be subject to continued and regular inspection regardless of their previous performance ratings.

The impact of the inspection process on school improvement

5. Carrying out subject specific inspections as part of Ofsted's remit is essential, and should continue in order to help schools improve in specific areas. Ofsted currently carries out subject specific inspections in order to write subject reports, which should inform Government about whether the curriculum and its teaching is effective, and indicate to schools what outstanding practice looks like (for example, appropriate deployment of teachers and a good balance of subject specialist teachers). The number of these inspections should be increased to provide statistically useful data on the impact of policies, structures and initiatives in school departments. The need for this has increased with the forthcoming abolition of the National Strategies and the role they have played in collecting evidence and data from schools.
6. It would be useful to have clarification on whether Ofsted will take on the role of data collection (as has been assumed above). And, if not, how that data will be collected in future.
7. Only 30 primary schools are visited for primary science subject reports. This is the same level of visits the foundation subjects receive. However, science is a core subject, not a foundation subject. The other two core subjects (mathematics and English) each have 45 school visits to

inform their subject-specific reports, which even then is not a statistically significant proportion of schools to draw any firm conclusions from. If science is to be considered a core subject in primary education, and we would argue that it is, it should be treated similarly to mathematics and English. With such small sample sizes, we can do no more than treat the subject inspection reports as a series of interesting case studies and this limits their effectiveness in improving schools. Ofsted declares that it is serious about subject work. The small sample of schools inspected in subject inspections would indicate otherwise.

8. Effective Ofsted inspections of initial teacher education are crucial to ensure (and enhance) the impact of a high quality workforce.
9. We strongly support the Select Committee's recommendation that only schools that participate in a training partnership should be awarded the top grade in Ofsted inspection. We would like to see this extended to the department level for large departments (which will include science) in department reports. Furthermore, Ofsted should inspect the quality of support offered to trainees by their school-based mentors; currently, the existence and training of these mentors is checked by Ofsted when they inspect ITE establishments; and the quality of teaching is inspected in the schools. However, the quality of the mentoring provision for trainees in schools is slipping through the net.
10. In their inspections of ITE providers in the sciences, Ofsted should note the balance in the number of places offered for trainees in the different sciences. On the basis of this information providers should be encouraged by funders to provide at least as many places for physics and chemistry as for biology and, where possible, ITE establishments should be encouraged to take more physics trainees to try to redress the imbalance in teacher specialisms within the workforce.

The performance of Ofsted in carrying out its work

11. Inspection can be used to set aspirational goals for schools, helping them to progress and eventually become good or outstanding schools. Subject specific standards should be informed by dialogue with appropriate stakeholders. SCORE partners welcomed the opportunity to contribute to Ofsted's recent subject specific inspection guidance consultation. This has ensured that evidence and experience provided by the subject communities is directly available to inspectors and schools. For science, this includes reporting on laboratory facilities and resources, progression routes available to (and taken by) students and the qualifications and deployment of the workforce (including the spread and use of subject specialists).
12. SCORE supports renewed emphasis on a scientific approach to inspection, ensuring that inspectors are rigorous and methodical in their approach, including the support of subjective judgements with evidence. With respect to classroom practice, inspectors should be trusted to

recognise good teaching and learning when they see it and be given the freedom to credit it. They should not require schools to be strictly bound by a rigorous framework of criteria that define what constitutes good and effective practice.

13. The subject inspectors within Ofsted are often hugely knowledgeable. Their expertise is underused in terms of helping teachers move forward. Whilst we understand that the number of speaking engagements a subject officer can undertake each year are limited, meetings with teachers are excellent opportunities for Ofsted to use their knowledge to promote outstanding practice, to take the challenge to others, point teachers in the right direction of approved resources and to promote genuine dialogue about improving science practice. Ofsted should enable and encourage this to happen more often.

The consistency and quality of inspection teams in the Ofsted inspection process

14. Inspection teams should have access to subject specific professional development opportunities, to ensure that they have up-to-date awareness of their own subject and the best methods for inspecting its teaching. Often data is explained in ways that conflict with research evidence or interpretations assume a particular theoretical stance. These theoretical assumptions about learning, learners, knowledge and pedagogy need to be explicit and if possible alternative perspectives considered. This requires professional development related to education more widely.
15. If Ofsted itself does not currently have the expertise or resources to ensure that its inspections are fully valid and reliable, then there may well be a case for greater parliamentary scrutiny of the organisation to ensure that this happens.

The role of Ofsted in providing an accountability mechanism

16. Ofsted has an important role in accountability at the school level. The inspection process needs to draw on a wide range of evidence, including subject specific inspections. The relentless focus on very narrow measures (such as 5 A*-C at GCSE) by Ofsted and other agencies, has had a negative effect on teaching and learning and distorted the assessment system. The data from qualifications, which is currently used with a dual purpose (assessing schools as well as their students) should be replaced – or at least balanced – with other evidence and considered in more sophisticated ways. For example, overall measures of achievement often referred to in Ofsted subject reports should be examined in relation to sub-group performance by grade distribution, again taking careful account of the representativeness of the students who take up particular subjects. Otherwise teachers will continue to focus on improving achievement in a limited number of high stakes assessments. This sort of approach does not lead to better learning and deeper understanding but often a

search for the easiest exam and drilling students to pass the test in order to satisfy the league tables.

17. Ofsted must distinguish in its work between accountability and improvement. A school's accountability should not be affected by factors over which it has no control, for example its intake or resourcing.
18. As the diversity of the school system increases, and there is also an increase in autonomy for schools, Ofsted's role in accountability needs to be clear. All pupils should have access to a broad and balanced science curriculum with appropriate pathways to vocational and academic qualifications. Ofsted's role in ensuring that this is taking place is at present unclear.