Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education

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House of Commons
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The Role and Performance of Ofsted

Dear Kathryn,

The Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education (ACME) is pleased to offer its evidence to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into the role and performance of Ofsted. ACME is an independent committee based at the Royal Society and operating under its auspices, with a remit to provide advice on issues affecting 5-19 mathematics education in England. Our submission is therefore limited to the effect of Ofsted on mathematics in schools and colleges.

ACME would like to draw the Committee's attention to the following points, which it feels are pertinent to this inquiry and should be pursued further with Ofsted:

Generic versus subject-specific approaches

1. In considering Ofsted's performance the Committee should distinguish carefully between general inspections (Section 5 of the Education Act 2005) carried out by private contractors and subject-specific surveys carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI). Section 5 inspections are required to be generic and encompass matters such as pupil welfare and atmosphere, with inspection of teaching and learning focused on data analysis and moderation of schools' own self-evaluation. Ofsted rightly supplements the Section 5 regime with a tailored survey of subject teaching and produces reports on its overall findings.

2. Subject-specific reports such as *Understanding the Score*[1] provide unique and essential information on the state of mathematics teaching in England which is not readily available from any other source, and on the basis of which an agenda can be set for national improvements. *Understanding the Score* was particularly informative and echoed ACME's views of the current state of mathematics education. Subject surveys in general highlight strengths as well as areas for attention to ensure that best practice is built on where it is found. Headteachers often report how the feedback within one subject points them to similar areas for development in other areas that were not the subject of the original survey visit. The procedures for subject-specific surveys in schools could usefully be mirrored in Ofsted's FE college subject inspections; the current regime considers mathematics only within a group of other sciences and psychology.

3. ACME's interactions with HMI on mathematics matters are often positive and well-informed, creating an impression that the natural pedagogical requirements of different subjects are understood and well accounted for in Ofsted's processes. In particular,

[1] Available from http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/Mathematics-understanding-the-score

ACME was pleased to contribute its thoughts to the draft subject-specific guidance notes for the subject-specific surveys[2] and sees these as a valuable development which will promote improvements in mathematics teaching in schools.

4. However, we are concerned that, in practice, it is mainly the Section 5 processes that have a lasting influence on the way that children are taught in schools. We are becoming increasingly concerned at an unfortunate gap developing between the practices encouraged through the subject-specific reports and those incentivised by the Section 5 inspections[3]. This gap manifests itself in a mismatch between the assurances that we are given through HMI and Ofsted leaders and the messages we receive direct from teachers in schools.

Negative effects of Section 5 inspections

5. In particular, we believe that Section 5 inspections are indirectly (and maybe inadvertently) encouraging the growth of early entry into GCSE mathematics through a focus on the number of qualifications that pupils achieve at grade C or above, rather than the learning engendered through them or how well prepared they are for the next stage. We are deeply concerned about the rise in entering entire cohorts one or more years early without regard to the effect it might have on their progression in the subject post-GCSE or their long-term attitudes to and confidence in mathematics. Blanket early entry can also depress grades, since those who achieve a grade C or higher are unlikely to be re-entered even if they might ultimately have been capable of achieving more – it seems particularly perverse that an Ofsted inspection could potentially prevent some pupils from reaching their full potential[4]. In contrast, *Understanding the Score* is clear on this issue – this is a powerful example of the gap between what is incentivised through Section 5 inspection and the subject-specific messages from HMI.

6. ACME is also concerned about the extent to which Section 5 inspectors are knowledgeable enough about mathematics pedagogy to comment on mathematics teaching in schools, particularly given the apparent wish to apply generic requirements to lesson formats. It can seem as though more attention is paid to lesson format than to the quality of student experience or of their learning. Moreover, we are aware of instances where feedback given through Ofsted inspections directly contradicts the training that mathematics teachers have received through research-based subject-specific CPD courses. We suggest that the Committee asks Ofsted how it can be confident that these discrepancies are not increasing, since the background of most inspectors is non-mathematics specialist.

7. Given the high stakes of Section 5 inspection, we believe that school Senior Management Teams have a tendency to adopt Ofsted-style observational techniques for internal assessment between inspections, and that there can be a greater gap in these cases between the assessor's understanding of what constitutes excellent subject-specific pedagogy and that of the teacher they are assessing. These factors do not serve to improve the quality of teaching of mathematics in schools and colleges.

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[2] ACME's response is available from http://acme-uk.org/news.asp?id=202 ; Ofsted's draft guidance is at http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Forms-and-guidance/Browse-all-by/Other/General/Generic-grade-descriptors-and-draft-supplementary-subject-specific-guidance-for-inspectors-on-making-judgements-during-subject-survey-visits-to-schools

[3] Teachers can be left with the impression that Ofsted demands a proliferation of written evidence, leading to the avoidance of setting mathematical tasks that do not produce this.

[4] The Mathematical Association (www.m-a.org.uk) has recently set out its position on early entry at http://www.m-a.org.uk/jsp/index.jsp?lnk=700. A focus on the number of qualifications achieved also has the effect of reducing time available for teaching and in-depth study.

8. Section 5 inspections attempt to assess pupil progress within a lesson through short observations, but the study of mathematics does not always lend itself to instant enlightenment. While some students assimilate new ideas very quickly, others (including deep thinkers) may take longer to become confident with the use of a new concept and develop a deeper understanding. It is notable that the draft subject-specific criteria refer to the 'development of conceptual understanding over time' and the need to 'persevere when faced with challenges', which the Section 5 inspections cannot hope to provide rigorous evidence about through a 20-minute observation.

Ofsted's future role

9. As we indicate in paragraph 1, Ofsted's role is very broad. We believe that this has been a limiting factor to Ofsted's performance, and we welcome the Government's intention to relieve Ofsted of some of its 'peripheral' duties. A greater focus on pedagogy (with suitable account taken for diversity between subjects) and on educational progress (rather than on attainment of particular qualifications) could serve to improve Ofsted's effectiveness greatly.

10. Ofsted's role in reporting on the curriculum being used should be reinforced, particularly in the context of the increased freedoms being granted to schools in this area. Michael Gove's recent letter to HM Chief Inspector[5] suggests that there will be no scope for reporting on this, given the proposed headings of "quality of teaching, effectiveness of leadership, pupil behaviour and safety, and pupil achievement".

11. With the demise of the National Strategies and the reduction in mathematics specialist support from Local Authorities, there is a risk that participation in mathematics-specific CPD may dwindle. We suggest that Ofsted could have a wider role to play in improving teaching in schools by placing more emphasis on reporting the extent to which teachers of mathematics have access to subject-specific CPD, and on whether the existing training days available in the year are used for anything other than generic purposes.

12. Good use can be made of the expertise that resides in Ofsted through using subject specialist HMIs to train Section 5 inspectors; this can go some way to addressing the mixed messages being received.

13. HMI subject expertise should also be used to inform the development and conduct of qualifications, given the extent to which examinations can drive teaching. This could be achieved by extending Ofsted's subject role to include HMI attendance at subject awarding body meetings, complementing Ofqual's role as an independent regulator.

Yours sincerely,

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Chair, ACME

[5] Michael Gove's letter to Christine Gilbert (HM Chief Inspector), 22 September 2010: http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/s/secretary%20of%20state%20to%20christine%20gilbert%2022%20sept.PDF