
Director General for Regulation

Iain Bell
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Dear Iain,

ACADEMY PERFORMANCE STATISTICS

I am writing about correspondence that the UK Statistics Authority received in May 2015, expressing concern about Ministers' use of statistics on school performance and its relation to school type; in particular that a faster rate of improvement in performance in some primary schools results was being presented by Ministers as being caused by their academy status.

There were two instances of Ministers' use of statistics that were of apparent concern.

1. An interview by the Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb MP on BBC Radio 4's Today programme on 2 February 2015 as reported in Schools Week
<http://schoolsweek.co.uk/schools-requiring-improvement-face-academisation/>
2. Comments made by the Secretary of State for Education, Rt. Hon. Nicky Morgan MP, to the House of Commons on 2 March 2015 in response to oral questions
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm150302/debtext/150302-0001.htm#1503023000004>.

The Authority has reviewed these uses of the statistics and concluded that the comments made by Ministers on the Today programme and in the House of Commons did not misrepresent the statistics.

In the interview on BBC Radio 4's Today Programme - and based on the quote reported in Schools Week rather than the original transcript - the Minister for Schools was not specific about exactly which statistics were being compared over what time period. However, the statement is consistent with the statistics that are published in DfE's Statistical First Release (SFR) that presents Key Stage 2 statistics for primary schools for 2014¹.

As reported in Hansard, the Secretary of State made a very similar statement – using the phrase 'double the rate of improvement' - to the one the Minister for Schools made on the

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-curriculum-assessments-at-key-stage-2-2014-revised>

Today programme. She was more specific about what was being compared and quoted a percentage point increase in performance for primary sponsor academies that was consistent with the published statistics in the SFR.

The area of academy performance is closely related to important policy matters for government. It is likely that these statistics will be drawn on in discussions about policy. For example, the Department’s recently published Academies Annual Report for 2013/14² considered evidence on the relative performance of academies. It is therefore particularly important that the interpretation of the statistics is clear. In that light we have reviewed DfE’s Key Stage 2 SFR that has National Statistics status.

We consider that the way that change in performance by school type was presented in the SFR – including numerical comparisons but with limited contextual information – did not make it clear that the differences in the rates of improvement in performance were not necessarily caused by school type. As box 1 demonstrates, the SFR presented statistical comparisons between the different school types and users might reasonably infer that these were conceptually – and not just statistically – valid comparisons to make.

Box 1: Key Stage 2 results: extract of statistics and text presented in SFR
1) Percentage of pupils that achieved Level 4 or above in all of reading, writing and arithmetic at Key Stage 2 by school type, 2011/12 to 2013/14 ¹

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
School type	%	%	%
Local authority maintained schools	75	76	79
Sponsored academies	59	61	68
Converter academies	79	80	83

¹ Based on a consistent cohort of schools regardless of previous academic status: sponsored academies, 420; converter academies, 1,006; LA maintained schools, 13,396)
 Source: DfE - SFR 50/2014: National Curriculum assessments at key stage 2 in England 2014 (revised), issued 11 December 2104; <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-curriculum-assessments-at-key-stage-2-2014-revised>

2) SFR text extract:

This suggests that attainment in sponsored academies increased by 7 percentage points between 2013 and 2014, compared to only 3 percentage points in converter academies and LA maintained schools.

We have some constructive suggestions that might minimise the possibility of misinterpretation.

- Commenting on the limitations would make it clearer to Ministers and to other users that the statistics could not be used to infer a causal link between school type and either attainment or rates of improvement.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/academies-annual-report-academic-year-2013-to-2014>

- Making informed references to DfE's and other research findings, and reflecting these in the choice and presentation of analyses would enable the user to make valid comparisons.
- Presenting informative commentary that takes account of the Authority's report *Official Statistics, performance measurement and targets*³ would enhance the trustworthiness, quality and value of these National Statistics.

I look forward to seeing these improvements incorporated into future National Statistics publications. I have replied separately to the correspondence we received on this issue, and the exchange of correspondence has been published on the Authority's website <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/reports---correspondence/correspondence/index.html> .

Yours sincerely,



Ed Humpherson

³ <http://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/assessment/monitoring/monitoring-reviews/index.html>