

Public/Private Education Partnerships 2025

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Background

This paper offer some thoughts and discusses a range of issues on a 'Research Challenge' in the area of public/private education relationships for the Department of Children Schools and Families (DCSF) 'Beyond Current Horizons' programme. The plan is to outline a set of ideas on how a research challenge could shed some light on how this area may evolve over time in the face of technological changes and the way in which they impact on education markets.

A central question to motivate this endeavour is:

How might the balance between state and commercial delivery of education change in the context of technological development?

In this paper I expand upon this question, and the various additional and supplementary questions on more specific factors that it raises. The intention is to work up and illuminate the key areas that research looking at the question of how public/private education relationships can evolve and develop, and some of the key policy and practical questions that relate to these patterns of change.

Structure of Paper

So as to organise the discussion I have divided the paper up into a number of practical and organisational themes. In the next section I briefly discuss the context in which the issue of public/private partnerships in education currently operate. After this I identify some of the key issues and over-arching questions that could face a research challenge in the public/private partnerships area. Then the paper moves on to discuss these, first by considering which disciplinary domains are best suited to inform this challenge and then discussing two important areas for which the challenge has potentially significant implications: the nature, role and organisation of education; and social justice and social mobility.

Following this, I will turn my attention to a set of more practical issues facing the challenge. First, there is the question of what kinds of methods that can be used to inform the challenge. Second, there is the engagement of research groups who may be able to participate in the challenge. And third, there is the question of interactions with project stakeholders.

I will conclude by offering a summary and overview of the central challenges I envisage in the area of public/private education relationships 2025.

Context

Having the market play a significant role and an increased use of private sector methods in the state sector have been fairly recent innovations in UK education. Of course, there has been a long history of private education in England, but over almost its entire history it has stayed largely independent of what goes on in the state sector. Only relatively recently have there been serious attempts to bring significant aspects of private sector involvement or private sector methods to the state sector.

There are a number of reasons why this has become a popular venture. First, the development of a quasi-market in education has had strong political currency¹. Its link to incentives and to the perceptions of better performance in the private sector lends itself naturally to the education market. Second, in the last couple of decades there has been an upsurge of public/private ventures in a range of industries in the UK (from the full blown

¹ See Le Grand (1991, 1993) and the more recent discussion of the quasi-market in Machin and Vignoles (2005)

privatization programmes through to the contracting out of various services in the public sector). Third, there has been a weakening of teacher unions, who traditionally would have opposed the kinds of private finance initiatives and public/private partnerships that have more recently been gaining attention.

To date, there have been two main forms of private sector involvement in the state sector: private finance initiatives (PFIs) and public/private partnerships (PPPs).

The former try to bring aspects of private sector business more directly into the process of asset provision in the public sector. For example, PFI projects in schools may involve the purchase of services from the private sector such as school buildings, facilities such as sports halls, or specific services including heating systems, ICT or catering equipment. They are much more concerned with non-academic operations (thus sometimes referred to by practitioners as 'chore' not 'core'). Public/private partnerships, on the other hand, encompass a wide range of activities in which the public and private sectors work together, including joint ventures, and very often with an aim to improve educational standards.

In the English schooling system, one of the most high profile partnerships with private sector co-funding has been the recent City Academies programme^{2,3}. In some ways Academies represent a mixture or hybrid of both PFI and PPP in that they are a joint venture between the state and their private sector sponsors, where the latter are directly involved in the provision of education services and assets.

What do these more recent patterns of an increased shift towards private sector influence in the state sector mean for future public/private partnerships? Given the sizable investments it is evident that programmes like the Academies programme are likely to form an important part of the education landscape in future. For example, by September 2007 there were 83 Academies open and government plans are underway to establish 400 Academies, with at least 200 of these open or planned to be opened by 2010. Contracted out services are also a feature of many education establishments and are likely to be here to stay.

There are other ways, that to date have only played a limited role, in which the private sector could play a role in education through public/private partnerships. In Academies the private sector sponsor has been able to play a role in defining the curriculum, and this is a clear area where more private sector provision could be prevalent. The same is true of methods of assessment and international testing agencies. Other media providers may be able to play a role. All of these become especially relevant in the face of technological changes and the fact that aspects of computerised and digitised learning are inevitably going to be more important in future. This applies at all levels of state education, including schools, universities and Colleges, and providers of adult/lifelong learning.

How the education sector could evolve in the face of an increased role for private sector interaction offers an important policy and research challenge for the future. I therefore next discuss what I view to be some of the more important questions of relevance for this challenge.

Key Questions for the Challenge

After considering and contemplating this difficult issue for quite some time, I have identified the following key questions for the challenge:

- 1 How to ascertain whether use of private sector strategies in the public sector yields better education outcomes than state based solutions?

From a research perspective, the jury is very much out on whether the use of private sector methods, or additional private sector involvement, yields better outcomes than state based

² For a more detailed discussion see Machin and Wilson (2008)

methods. A rigorous appraisal is required in a challenge, and this would need some discussion of how we can better learn about evaluating public-private partnerships, including how one can properly pilot and monitor such programmes.

2 In public/private education partnerships how can the right mix of public and private be facilitated?

Research is needed on what the right mix of public and private should be. Many existing partnerships (like the Academies) are majority state run and financed. Other contracted out services are typically involved with only a small set of activities within education establishments. If cross-sector partnerships are able to improve outcomes then a key question that follows is the 'optimal' mix. This is especially the case if technological developments are likely to lead to an increased private sector provision in areas like curriculum design, assessment and the provision of services from media organisations.

3 What can be learnt from other international public/private education (and other) partnerships and how can these be appropriately be monitored to make UK partnerships more effective.

There are now many public/private partnerships across the world and close and careful research monitoring of these is likely to be important in the context of globalization and the cooperation of state and non-state actors in education delivery. Whether there is likely to be a role for international suppliers of education services to the UK education system is an important question within this.

4 To set up a comprehensive data base on public/private education partnerships so as to carefully monitor their activities and to offer a means to evaluate their effectiveness.

The best means to appraise where we are going in terms of public/private partnerships is to set up and maintain a comprehensive data base on their activities that can be used to evaluate their impact on educational performance. A challenge in the area needs to work out how this can be developed.

5 Appraising how public/private partnerships keep up with and fully utilise technological changes and developments.

Rapid, worldwide technological changes are important for education in the future and an important challenge to public/private partnerships is to ensure that cutting edge technological developments are incorporate into their activities. As already discussed above, the extent to which these changes and developments generate an increased role for the private/commercial education delivery needs to be appraised.

Disciplines

Appraising, monitoring and evaluating public/private partnerships in the face of technological developments is likely to cover a number of research disciplines. There is a significant need to develop an evidence base on public/private partnerships and a means to compare and contrast their performance with state (or private) educational establishments. Quantitative researchers (from areas like Economics, Education, Geography and Public Management) would seem to be important here. Where more detailed case study approaches are more appropriate, qualitative researchers (from areas like Sociology and Education) would be required. To appraise areas like the increased role of computer and digital technologies some interaction with technology specialists (from areas of Science and Innovation) would also be relevant.

Implications for the nature, role and organisation of education

Ascertaining how the best delivery of education can be facilitated should be the main aim. Thus use of public/private partnerships has implications for the nature, role and organisation of education. Is it possible that private sector methods can be developed, in

conjunction with new technologies, to offset traditional problems that have continually arisen in UK education? Can new technologies be harnessed in a more efficient manner by public/private partnership, as compared to the state sector alone? And what are the methods that can facilitate this without imposing social costs?

Implications for social justice and social mobility

One long standing worry about private education, and allowing a role for the private market in state education provision, has been its possible effect of exacerbating already existent inequalities. For example, the research on the effects of choice and competition in education stresses that, whilst more choice and competition in education may raise standards on average, it also increases educational inequalities and therefore acts to reduce social mobility and social justice. The challenge must bear this in mind and try to consider how the key questions can be answered without having negative implications for social justice and social mobility. Given what we know so far, where evidence that choice and competition improve standards is very hard to find (Gibbons et al, 2008), this is a very significant concern facing the question of whether public/private partnerships can deliver better outcomes. *Methods (to generate evidence and identify uncertainties)* The main methods must be aimed at developing a robust and comprehensive data base on public/private partnerships in education. It also needs (as noted above) to draw on researchers who are able to deliver research that can evaluate whether public/private partnerships, and third sector education provision, is better able to deliver improved performance than state based solutions. To do so requires development of a conceptual framework to appraise the way in which public/private partnerships can be evaluated, coupled with experience in carrying out evaluation work.

Engagement of possible research groups

In the UK, the principal academic research groups who have potential interest in the role of the market and in private sector involvement in state education would seem to be those currently working on the effects of different methods of education provision. These would include a highly selective list of leading research groups.

Many international research groups are interested in public/private partnerships in education. In the US, the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard have a strong interest, especially in the area of Charter Schools. In the context of developing countries many institutions have strong interests in evaluating public/private partnerships, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Interactions with project stakeholders

To ensure that work in the area of this Challenge could be credible with key project stakeholders, my personal view is that it has to be undertaken to ensure rigour and robustness in the key findings. To this end, the need for a comprehensive data base that places the UK in its appropriate international context, and consideration of how the use of robust evaluation methods to work out whether public/private partnerships are able to deliver better outcomes (e.g. thinking through how rigorous piloting of initiatives could be used to scientifically assess their potential), seem to me to be vital ingredients of the research challenge.

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper I have attempted to outline what I view to be some of the more important questions and issues facing a research challenge on 'Public/Private Education Relationships 2025'. Such a challenge would need to be concerned with the extent to which state and commercial delivery of education services can (or cannot) improve educational outcomes and service delivery. Central to this is the question of what is the right mix or balance of state versus private delivery.

In my view, because of increased globalization and technological developments, this is a potentially important research area for future education. A research challenge in the area would need to be able to set up a framework that should be useful in appraising the

feasibility of public/private partnerships and what aspects of them would be important in the context of education. Doing so would need judgements to be drawn from research on public/private partnerships and the development of an evidence base that can use this to consider the balance and mix between public and private delivery, setting this in context with what happens elsewhere and on what is likely to happen in the future in the face of technological changes and developments.

References

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