

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Bristol		
Unit of Assessment: 16 – Economics and Econometrics		
Title of case study: University of Bristol research evidence changes national education policy in England		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2005 - 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Simon Burgess	Professor of Economics	09/1987 – present
Adam Briggs	Research Assistant	10/2004 – 09/2006
Jack Worth	Research Assistant	09/2008 – 09/2010
Deborah Wilson	Senior Research Fellow	09/2003 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 - 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

The very strong performance of schools in London since the early 2000s was widely attributed to the “London Challenge” policy and, by 2014, policymakers were advocating the extension of the policy to the rest of England. However, research from the University of Bristol demonstrated that this strong performance was instead due to the capital’s high percentage of ethnic minority pupils who, on average, perform better than white British pupils.

This research changed policymakers’ understanding of London’s strong educational performance. This shift fed directly into a policy change to abandon the idea for a nationwide rollout of the London Challenge policy. This meant that approximately GBP0.5 billion of public funds were saved by abandoning an ineffective policy and Government and educational professionals’ time was saved for other, more effective, policies.

2. Underpinning research

Urban areas are often associated with poor educational attainment. But London is different. Analysis suggests that the attainment and progress of pupils in London is the highest in England. A leading education policy commentator argued that: “*Perhaps the biggest question in education policy over the past few years is why the outcomes for London schools have been improving so much faster than in the rest of the country*”¹.

Research led by Simon Burgess of the University of Bristol concluded that the London Effect can be entirely explained by the ethnic mix of London’s population. His long-running research programme, which began in 2004, uses large-scale administrative data to understand the role of ethnicity in education in England more broadly. The programme has benefited from ten years of highly competitive ESRC Centre funding [i, ii] to the Centre for Market and Public Organisation (CMPO) where the programme is based. It focuses on the key measure of pupil achievement in England, namely performance in the GCSE exams at age 16. These qualifications act as the gatekeeper for continuing in school, for access to HE and as a basic criterion for getting jobs. They are, therefore, key to life chances. The programme continues today, with a 2018 paper exploring attitudes to education among native and immigrant pupils in England [R5].

¹ Freedman, S. (2014) The London Schools Effect - what have we learned this week?

http://samfreedman1.blogspot.co.uk/2014_06_01_archive.html

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Ethnicity and educational attainment

The foundation stage of this research programme, and the basis for the impact, involved modelling and understanding the achievement trajectories of pupils across England from different ethnic backgrounds. A Discussion Paper published in 2005 [R1] showed that, in terms of academic progress through secondary school (or “value-added”), all ethnic minority groups make greater progress on average than white students between the ages of 11 and 16, either catching up with white pupils, or overtaking white pupils. For example, pupils with Bangladeshi ethnicity start secondary school 0.3 standard deviations (SD) of achievement below white pupils but finish 0.32 SDs above. This gain of 0.6 SDs equates to changing five GCSE C grades all to A. The results were updated and expanded in the research group’s commissioned contribution to the First Report of the National Inequality Panel in 2009 [R2]. The work of the programme was published in 2011 in the *Journal of Population Economics* [R3]. The finding that pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds make significantly better progress through secondary school than white British pupils was the key point of the paper. Controversial and surprising at the time, this is now accepted as conventional wisdom. The difference in performance can be explained in part by the fact that ethnic minority students and families often have higher aspirations and more positive attitudes to school.

Understanding the true cause of the London Effect

Burgess went on to apply the analysis and insights developed during the foundation stage to a specific and highly topical (in 2014) policy issue – understanding the success of London schools. It had become clear that pupils in London scored much more highly on average at GCSE than those in the rest of England. The size of the effect was substantial: average pupil progress was 11.3% SD higher in London, or 2.5 percentage points more likely to achieve the standard benchmark of at least 5 GCSEs graded at C or higher. Understanding the source of this boost held out the possibility of replicating it around England if it were due to some policy. This stage of the research was published in 2014 [R4].

In fact, there was just such a candidate policy for London’s superior educational performance: The London Challenge. Key features of this policy, which ran from 2003 to 2011, included a focus on partnership, school-to-school support, and the use of comparative performance data. This was supplemented by support from a central team of education experts and administrative support from the Department for Education. The conventional view at the time was that the London Challenge was straightforwardly the cause of the ‘London GCSE premium’ (see, for example, evidence sources IM2 and IM3). However, Burgess’ research showed conclusively that this was not the case [R4]. The enhanced GCSE performance in fact arose from the high ethnic diversity of London schools. Building on the earlier work [R1, R2, R3] showing the higher progress of ethnic minority pupils, this translates into higher average performance where those pupils are disproportionately to be found. In fact, the dramatically different ethnic composition of schools in London accounted for all or almost all of the ‘London premium’. One key piece of evidence to note was that the ‘London GCSE premium’ was also present in Birmingham, clearly not involved at all in the London Challenge, but similarly ethnically diverse. In contrast, the predominantly white British city of Newcastle demonstrates much lower educational achievement [R4].

3. References to the research

[R1] Discussion paper, 2005. ‘The dynamics of school attainment of England’s ethnic minorities’. By **Wilson, Burgess** and **Briggs**. Centre for Market and Public Organisation Working paper 05/130. <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/cmppo/publications/papers/2005/abstract130.html>

[R2] National Report contribution, 2009. ‘Passing through school: the evolution of attainment of England’s ethnic minorities: A report for the National Equality Panel’. By **Burgess, Wilson** and **Worth**

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cmppo/migrated/documents/ethnicminorities.pdf>

[R3] Peer-reviewed publication, 2011. ‘The dynamics of school attainment of England’s ethnic minorities’ By **Wilson, Burgess** and **Briggs**. *Journal of Population Economics*. Vol. 24, No. 2 (April 2011), pp. 681-700. DOI: 0.1007/s00148-009-0269-0.

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[R4] Discussion paper, 2014. 'Understanding the success of London's schools'. By **Burgess** Centre for Market and Public Organisation Working paper 14/333
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/cmpo/migrated/documents/wp333.pdf>

[R5] Discussion paper, 2018. 'Motivated to Succeed? Attitudes to Education among Native and Immigrant Pupils in England'. By **Burgess** and G. Heller-Sahlgren. IZA DP No. 11678, IZA. Bristol 60% contribution, leading and proposing the study and research design, LSE 40%.
<https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/11678/motivated-to-succeed-attitudes-to-education-among-native-and-immigrant-pupils-in-england>

Grant information

[i] **Burgess**. Centre for Market and Public Organisation. ESRC Research Centre Grants. 01/10/2004 - 01/10/2009. GBP1,132,926.

[ii] **Burgess**. Centre for Market and Public Organisation. ESRC Research Centre Grants. 01/10/2009 - 01/04/2015. GBP3,696,935.

4. Details of the impact

Prior to the publication of Burgess' influential 2014 paper, Understanding the Success of London Schools [R4], there was pressure to roll out the London Challenge around England. For example, David Laws, then Minister for Schools said in the House of Commons: "*One lesson that I would draw is that it is important for us to provide the opportunities that the London Challenge helped to create for every part of the country, and not just for areas that have been selected by Ministers*"².

Burgess' underpinning research created two key impacts in relation to the London Challenge: (1) a change in policymakers' understanding of the London GCSE premium; and, following this, (2) a clear change in national educational policy: the shelving of the London Challenge roll-out across England, thus preventing what would have been an expensive and time-consuming wrong turn.

1. Changing the understanding of the London Premium

The research led to a clear shift in understanding of the London GCSE premium, leading to the realisation that it could be explained by the ethnic diversity of London's schools combined with the higher performance of ethnic minority pupils. This shift was achieved through an extensive dissemination strategy of [R4] in 2014, first through the media, nationally and regionally, and particularly in London. Dissemination to policymakers then followed.

Mass media dissemination

Extensive publicity created a strong public profile for the research. It was covered very widely on the day of release, 12th November 2014 [IM5]. For instance, Burgess was interviewed on BBC Radio London, tweeted out by presenter and station to over 60,000 followers, and broadcast through the day. Burgess was also interviewed on LBC radio, tweeted out by presenter and station to over 140,000 followers. There were also TV interviews broadcast on BBC London TV, again tweeted to over 60,000 followers, and on ITV London TV. Other interviews included BBC Radio Bristol, BBC Radio East Midlands (particularly interested in the "London Effect' bigger in Birmingham" angle), and Kismet Radio, with a target audience of British Asians. Print media also took up the story strongly, including the Times, the Telegraph, the Daily Mail, the Guardian, the Independent, and the London Evening Standard.

Particularly noteworthy was a Times Leader on 12/11/2014 [IM2], reflecting well the main findings and demonstrating the challenge to conventional thinking "*Until now this difference [the London GCSE premium] has been accounted for by ... the London Challenge. But new research from Bristol University suggests there may be another explanation. ... In fact the*

² House of Commons Hansard Debates for 21 July 2014:
<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cm140721/debtext/140721-0001.htm>

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London Effect is almost entirely explicable in terms of the proportion of children that come from immigrant backgrounds.”

Policy dissemination

Once the research was well-known, attention turned to disseminating its findings to policymakers. Thanks to the research’s high profile, Burgess was asked to attend a high-level small-group meeting within the Department for Education, chaired by Under-Secretary of State for Education Sam Gyimah in 2016 [IM1]. The subject was the causes of the London GCSE performance, and while many views were debated, Burgess strongly put the case for the ethnic composition of London schools.

Later, in 2018, Burgess was invited to meet two policymakers in the Prime Minister’s Policy Unit in No. 10 Downing Street [IM3]. Again, the discussion referred to the research programme’s work on ethnic minority pupils’ school performance and the role of attitudes, aspirations and effort, including reference to Burgess’ latest Discussion Paper providing evidence directly on that [R5]. Other presentations of the work for the broader policy community included a panel debate at the Centre for Education Economics, in 2017, featuring the Director of the London Challenge as well as Burgess [IM6].

Changing minds

The research led to a clear change in policymakers’ understanding of the causes of the London premium. This impact is corroborated by a number of authoritative sources [IM1]:

“When I was working at the DfE it was accepted as axiomatic by most officials and policy-makers that the success of London schools ... had been largely driven by policy changes – in particular the London Challenge... From 2013 onwards this narrative started to be challenged. Professor Burgess’s research was particularly important in this as it highlighted the role of ethnic change in London as a far more important driver for improved results than policy.” (Former senior policy advisor to the Secretary of State for Education)

“[Burgess’s] research was extraordinarily impactful within government and policy circles. It changed the narrative... Prof Burgess’ research has now been largely accepted as the dominant explanation for the London effect.” (Former Head of Education, Policy Exchange)

“Simon’s research on the London effect has had a significant impact on Ofsted’s thinking about what works to improve educational attainment.... Before Simon’s research was published, most thinkers in Westminster believed that the London effect was due to the London Challenge ... I remember countless meetings in which it was left unquestioned that the London Challenge had been the defining change in London children’s fate.” (Head of Strategic Evaluation, Ofsted)

Clear confirmation that Government had changed its mind is provided by a speech in 2019 by then Secretary of State for Education Damian Hinds [IM4]. This big set-piece speech on social mobility makes it clear that the Department for Education no longer believes that the London GCSE premium derived from the London Challenge: *“The one [factor causing the GCSE premium] that is most often cited, I am going to suggest is not likely to be the biggest factor. And the thing that is most often cited is a thing called the London Challenge.”*

The research also reached the attention of those beyond educational circles. At the time of its release, it was praised by Trevor Phillips, founding head of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, as *“utterly spectacular”* [IM8]. Phillips further comments that prior to Burgess’ work *“the entire political and educational establishment has gone out of its way to pat itself on the back about the London effect, and actively avoided acknowledging that there might be some correlation with minority/migrant attainment.”*

Burgess’ research on the London Effect continues to be discussed widely in influential and authoritative media, testament to the mark it has made on public discourse. For instance, it has

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been discussed in features published by the Sunday Times (2015), the Financial Times (2016), the New Statesman (2016), and the TES (separate pieces in 2015, 2018 and 2019) [IM9].

2. Abandoning nationwide roll-out of the London Challenge

The research, publicity and meetings had an impact on the policymaking process, starting from 2015. High-level insiders in education policymaking [IM1] confirm that Burgess' paper [R4] was central to the switch in national education policy from favouring the London Challenge policy to shelving any further roll-outs, a move which would have affected all 2500 state-maintained mainstream secondary schools in England. For example [IM1]:

"[The] change in perspective made the policy world much more cautious about a large-scale roll-out of all the practices underlying the Challenge in the hope of replicating London's results. This in turn significantly reduced the likelihood of the introduction of any policy proposals along those lines." (Senior Advisor, Department for Education)

"Since Simon's research there has been no education policy initiative in England that tried to replicate the London Challenge. 10 years ago, this was a very real possibility... I think it less likely that the London Challenge would be reintroduced or copied as a result of Simon's work." (Head of Strategic Evaluation, Ofsted)

Details of a calculation of the value of redirecting policy are presented in [IM7]. Clearly the answer can only be suggestive and approximate, but savings of around GBP500 million seem likely. For scale, this is relative to a central government budget for secondary schools of GBP9.7 billion in 2013, so a significant fraction. Alternatively, that total can be thought of in relation to around 2500 state-maintained mainstream secondary schools. Secondary school pupils and school leadership teams in England have benefited from this saving of half a billion pounds. This money has been freed up for other, more evidence-based, educational initiatives.

But finances are not the whole story. Also important is the fact that a large amount of strategy, policy time, and delivery expertise was not wasted on rolling out an ineffective policy. Policymakers, policy teams and school leaders have only limited time and energy to assimilate and implement new policy ideas and the time saved by not rolling out the Challenge policy nationally has potentially allowed other interventions more scope to succeed. A former senior policy advisor to the Secretary of State for Education notes that *"There is now much less demand to replicate London Challenge and a greater focus on the contextual struggles of areas of the country where performance has not improved."* [IM1]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[IM1] Evidence of narrative and policy change:

- Ark Schools (2019) Supporting statement - former senior policy advisor to the Secretary of State for Education
- Department for Education (2019) Supporting statement - Expert Advisor (includes confirmation of attendance at Dept. for Education meeting with Sam Gyimah in 2016)
- Ofsted (2019) Supporting statement - Head of Strategic Evaluation
- Public First (2019) Supporting statement - former Head of Education, Policy Exchange

[IM2] [Leader/Editorial in the Times](#), 12th November 2014

[IM3] Invitation to private meeting at No 10 Policy Unit, Prime Minister's Office, 22 October 2018

[IM4] TES (2019) [Hinds casts doubt on London Challenge impact on schools](#)

[IM5] Selected media coverage: [BBC TV London Interview](#), 12th November 2014, The Times, 12th November 2014, [Daily Mail](#), 12th November 2014; LBC Radio Interview, 12th November 2014

[IM6] [Public Meeting on the 'London Effect' hosted by CFEE](#), 1st March 2017

[IM7] Details of a calculation of the value of redirecting policy

[IM8] Trevor Phillips (2014) Email correspondence

[IM9] Media coverage 2015-2019: [The Sunday Times](#) (2015); [TES](#) (2015); [Financial Times](#) (2016); [New Statesman](#) (2016); [TES](#) (2018), [TES](#) (2019)