



House of Commons Education Select Committee: the work of Ofsted

Written submission from the British Humanist Association

17 August 2015

About the British Humanist Association

1. The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. It is the largest organisation in the UK campaigning for an end to religious privilege and to discrimination based on religion or belief, and for a secular state.
2. The BHA has a long history of contributing towards and improving state education. We provide materials and advice to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics. We also work closely with others on wider equalities issues in a range of forums. The BHA is a member of the National Children's Bureau Sex Education Forum (SEF), the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE), Rights of the Child UK (ROCK) and the Religious Education Council for England and Wales.
3. We address three areas of concern: the fact that Ofsted does not inspect denominational RE and collective worship in 'faith' schools; the continued existence of the School Inspection Service; and issues related to identifying pseudoscience in schools.

Inspection of religious education and religious worship in 'faith' schools

4. Denominational religious education (RE) and collective worship in schools with a religious character are currently inspected under section 48 of the Education Act 2005 by inspectors appointed by the school's governing body. Ofsted inspectors carrying out standard section 5 inspections of schools with a religious character are therefore not entitled to specifically inspect denominational RE or the content of such worship. Rather, they may only visit lessons and assemblies to help them evaluate how they contribute to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development, as well as their personal development, behaviour and welfare. This is not sufficient.
5. Judgements on the effectiveness of leadership and management, for instance, must consider how the school promotes British values, including 'tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith'. We do not see how Ofsted is able to accurately assess this, or how it can ensure that pupils are receiving a broad and balanced curriculum, when inspectors are barred from specifically inspecting the content and teaching of worship and RE. This of course is not to mention the obvious conflict of interest that arises from schools selecting their own inspectors.
6. We therefore believe that the inspection of all religious worship and denominational RE in state-funded 'faith' schools should be carried out by Ofsted, and the content of that RE and worship should be fully taken into account in all assessments of the school's effectiveness.
7. More generally, we are concerned about the loss of specific survey inspections for subjects, including RE, in all schools, and the difficulties this has caused in establishing the quality of provision across the board. This is particularly concerning in the case of RE given the extent to which syllabuses vary, especially at a time when 'British values' issues are so pertinent.

Inspection of independent schools

8. Ofsted currently only inspects around half of all independent schools, while the other half, made up of schools belonging to independent school associations, are inspected by one of two independent school inspectorates: the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) and the School Inspection Service (SIS). Until this year a third inspectorate – the Bridge Schools Inspectorate (BSI) – operated and inspected private Muslim and Christian Schools' Trust schools, but it recently announced that it would be ceasing operations as of September 2015 following long-standing concerns over the independence of its inspectors from the two groups of schools they inspected.

9. The impartiality of the SIS also remains in question. Whilst individual inspectors are now required to be independent both from the school and from any organisation representing the school, we are not satisfied that this removes the conflict of interest to a sufficient extent.

10. For instance, despite having been founded by the Focus Learning Trust (FLT), whose schools teach in line with the views of the strict Christian group 'Exclusive Brethren', the SIS is responsible for inspecting all FLT's schools (as well as Steiner schools). This represents a clear conflict of interest and is an inadequate means of ensuring that schools are meeting both the necessary standards and their obligations with regard to safeguarding.

11. In order to improve consistency, avoid any conflicts of interest and ensure that standards can be accurately assessed, we believe that the SIS should be disbanded, just as the BSI was.

Pseudoscience

12. There is no explicit reference in either the inspection framework or the inspectors' handbook to addressing the teaching of pseudoscience in schools. It therefore does not appear to be the case that Ofsted routinely looks for indications or evidence that schools are teaching pseudoscience, nor that inspectors mark schools down when evidence is found – in spite of the fact that the Government has made repeatedly clear that it looks to Ofsted to do this.ⁱ

13. The BHA has frequently identified examples of state schools teaching pseudoscientific content, including creationism, as fact, only to find that Ofsted have inspected the school either shortly afterwards or shortly before and raised no such issues.ⁱⁱ It should not be the case that a school, state funded or otherwise, can receive a 'good' rating whilst teaching pseudoscientific theories as scientifically valid and wording to this effect should be added to the framework and handbook.

For more details, information and evidence, contact the British Humanist Association:

Pavan Dhaliwal,
Director of Public Affairs and Campaigns
0773 843 5059
pavan@humanism.org.uk
www.humanism.org.uk

ⁱ e.g. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/cm140428/text/140428w0005.htm#14042968000114> and ⁱ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2014-06-30/202970/>

ⁱⁱ This was the case with Yesodey Hatorah Senior Girls' School in Hackney, which was rated 'good' by Ofsted in 2013 despite 'blacking out' GCSE science exam questions where they contradicted the schools beliefs in areas such as creationism and sex education: <https://humanism.org.uk/2014/11/13/bha-questions-school-censored-evolution-exam-questions-receiving-good-rating-ofsted-inspection/>