

Darwinism for modern times: regulators must adapt too

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When our environment changes we must adapt to survive. Across private, public and not-for-profit sectors, boards and executives are busy rethinking.

- What do we keep?
- What do we ditch?
- What do we refresh?

When the history of 2020 comes to be written, the decisions in March to close schools and cancel public examinations will be seen as an ill-conceived 'rush to war'. If there is now a political commitment to hold a fundamental review of our system of examining at 16+, then historians may record one positive unintended consequence.

In the meantime, the new-old leadership at Ofqual, together with the DfE, have privileged certainty for 2021. Teachers and students know where they stand. Examination halls await in June. Aspects of GCSE have been kept, ditched, refreshed. Plan B may need to follow, but let's hope not.

But what of that other key mover and shaker in the education landscape? Ofsted has privileged *uncertainty*. The regulator has failed to adapt. Rather, it has fudged decisions which affect every school in its jurisdiction.

So what should be the future of school inspection this academic year?

First: regular section 5 inspections should be cancelled for the year. Having visited a good number of primary, special and secondary schools over the past term, it is self-evident that teachers, support staff, leaders and governors are not engaged in business as usual. They are providing an essential service with hands tied behind their backs. At the same time, they are adapting - and challenging historic orthodoxies.

Second: section 8 inspections should proceed, in consultation with individual schools. There are a number of schools sitting on inadequate judgements but which have improved their quality of education decisively. They deserve

recognition. Consistent with safety protocols and HMI capacity, small teams could visit and report accordingly.

Third: safeguarding reviews of identified schools of concern should proceed, as enshrined in Ofsted's statutory duties.

Fourth: the current 1200 'collaborative conversations' (virtual?) with leaders should not be reported on a school-by-school basis, but in a themed report in the style of the September pilots and in the best traditions of HMCI. It is a mistake to place additional pressure on headteachers and governors with individual published reports. The generic lessons from the past few months are what the system wishes to learn from.

Fifth: HMI should spend time refreshing the 2019 inspection framework - for September 2021 implementation. By common consent among school leaders, it is already outdated. Schools 'get' curriculum intent, implementation and impact. Move on.

Let the inspectorate weave into the framework three fresh 'I's:

Inclusion. Innovation. Inspiration.

HMI can then write about the ways in which schools nationally have led society through a global pandemic. Inspection reports will record how schools are demonstrably an *inclusive* haven for the nation's children and young people; how teachers have been tirelessly *innovative* in shaping blended learning; how leaders have *inspired* students and families to trust in their schools through uncertain social times.

Just before half-term, I asked a Year 10 student what message he had for the staff. With a warm smile he said: 'Keep going. Thanks for keeping us safe'.

Regulators are not designed to be generous. They *are* designed to be fair. In the end, last year's GCSE results saw Ofqual being both generous and fair.

Ofsted should practise its own Darwinism for modern times. The regulator must adapt to survive. It is currently behind the curve, nowhere near as agile as those it inspects.

School leaders and governors are waiting for a fair and generous announcement about inspection in the academic year ahead – and we are already three months into it.

Roy Blatchford's recent books are '[The Three Minute Leader](#)' and '[The Forgotten Third](#)', published by John Catt Education.