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TECHNICAL
REPORT



Accountability of teachers

Literature review

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Prepared for the General Teaching Council England

The research described in this report was prepared for the General Teaching Council England.

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Executive summary

The General Teaching Council for England (GTC) commissioned RAND Europe in 2008 to undertake a literature review to inform its thinking and preparations as it develops proposals for a new accountability framework for teachers in England. The framework includes, but is not limited to, arrangements operated via the GTC. This report presents the findings of the literature review.

The past 20 years have witnessed major changes in schools and their management and governance, radically transforming school policies and practices and introducing more systems of external monitoring. These changes have both reflected and altered perceptions of teachers' professionalism. An outcome is a greater emphasis on regulatory arrangements and quantifiable measurements of teachers' work. The establishment of the GTC for England in 2000 instituted statutory arrangements for regulating teachers' professional conduct and competence. The accountability relationships of teachers are embedded in their professional practice and conduct. The GTC wants to be informed about an optimal mix of accountability mechanisms that would be able to balance professional autonomy and external control to best serve the interests of the public and the quality of learning.

Accountability can be a somewhat slippery concept, defined in different ways in theory and in practice, and applied variously in a range of circumstances.

Accountability is an ethical concept – it concerns proper behaviour, and it deals with the responsibilities of individuals and organisations for their actions towards other people and agencies. The definition adopted for this review refers to research by Bovens (2005). He draws attention to the terms of the relationship between an 'actor' (individual or organisation) and their 'stakeholders'. Stakeholders are those with a particular interest in the work of the actor (including the actor's conduct, perceptions, attitudes and the outcomes of the actor's activities). According to Bovens accountability can be defined as the methods by which the actor may render an account (i.e. justify their actions and decisions) to the stakeholders and by which the stakeholders may hold the actor to account (i.e. impose sanctions or grant permissions).

Accountability arrangements are of great interest and significance for the office-holders, their superiors and the wider public because they deal with professional autonomy and external control: two powerful features of all working relationships.

Autonomy and control are especially relevant to mass public services that rely on the expertise and experience of trained professional workers. Levels of autonomy or control in any given circumstances will reflect the level of trust that exists between the actor and their

stakeholders. Where trust is relatively low, managerial controls are likely to be stronger. Where trust is relatively high, professional autonomy is likely to be stronger.

In the literature five types of accountability are generally recognised: organisational, political, legal, professional and moral/ethical.

Each type of accountability has its own methods of working. Organisational accountability works through the superior/subordinate relationships that define actors' authority and responsibility; political accountability relies on democratic institutions and processes to hold actors to account. Legal accountability works through the courts and other judicial institutions to protect rights and redress wrongs. Professional accountability is promulgated through codes of conduct or practice and systems of regulation designed and operated by peers. Moral or ethical accountability relies on the internalised values to which actors voluntarily adhere.

Regardless of type, accountability arrangements consist of three stages.

The three stages of accountability are: (i) defining accountability to whom or for what, (ii) informing the stakeholders, and (iii) judgement, which can lead to affirmation or sanctions.

Accountability arrangements are presumably designed to lead to positive benefits but they can also have negative effects.

The main positive aspects of accountability described in the literature are: democratic control, maintaining and/or enhancing the legitimacy and integrity of public governance, performance enhancement and support, plus a catharsis function when investigating cases of failure, error or wrong-doing. Negative aspects of accountability result when inconsistencies in the accountability arrangements produce perverse incentives and outcomes. This so called accountability dilemma occurs when factors intended to improve performance and outcomes have the opposite effect, or emphasise some elements of performance at the expense of other elements, with unacceptable consequences to some stakeholders. Accountability overload is a further factor that the literature deals with, showing the dysfunctional effects that may occur if desired performance improvements are undermined. Overload comes from having too many evaluation criteria in play simultaneously, and/or too many stakeholders each with their own requirements for reporting, with which the actor is expected to comply.

A gradual shift to more horizontal accountability in the public services is reported in the literature.

Horizontal accountability is a shift away from the traditional superior/subordinate relationships towards multiple, lateral relationships. Horizontal accountability is seen as widening and opening up the mechanisms for stakeholders to hold actors to account, and also making accountability a more transparent process. The New Public Management of the 1990s has contributed to this by developing a more contractual style of working relationship between service commissioners and service providers.

The growing importance of cross-sectoral working and modifications to professionals' roles and expectations pose a number of challenges to the bodies responsible for regulating professionals.

The literature finds that regulators do not yet put comparable emphasis on identifying or promoting more universal, cross-sectoral public service competencies. The other very significant change that accountability systems have to deal with is alterations to the structure of the workforce. Unqualified or less qualified assistants are being employed to undertake front line services, partly to relieve professionals of some of the less specialist workload, and partly to increase the capacity of the services as a whole. The issue for accountability arrangements is how to regulate unqualified support staff and hold them to account, where the services have up to now relied on professional staff.

The trend to de-professionalise teaching is noted in the literature.

The term de-professionalisation occurs in the literature in reference to these several changes: to the autonomy of professionals, the introduction of more external controls, performance measurements and monitoring, and moves to achieve greater transparency in accountability, particularly through the exercise of consumer choice.

The challenge to those redesigning accountability arrangements is to combine the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of different accountability types and methods.

The literature suggests some ways to assess whether autonomy and control are in the desired balance, by focusing on three objectives of accountability (democratic control, acceptable use of public resources, and promotion and encouragement of continuous improvement). These aspects can be assessed by asking questions that are presented in the final chapter.