**Press release**

**“Limited” evidence of sequential bias impacting school inspections, academics say.**

A new research paper published today by academics from the University of Southampton and UCL has found limited evidence of bias in Ofsted’s inspections of schools.

Using data on over 25,000 school inspections conducted in England between 2012 and 2019, the authors studied so-called “sequence effects”. This is where the judgement an inspection team reaches about a school is impacted by the judgement they reached about the school they inspected previously.

Such sequence effects have been observed previously in several other walks of life – from speed dating to investment decisions – but have never previously been studied in the context of school inspections. Given recent discussions about the reliability of the school inspection process this seems a pertinent topic.

While the authors found no evidence of these sequence effects for secondary school inspections, some limited evidence did emerge for primary schools. In particular, the odds of a lead inspector judging a school to be Inadequate are around 40% lower if they reached an Inadequate judgement in their previous inspection.

The authors note, however, that only around 5% of inspections result in an ‘Inadequate’ judgement, meaning this bias only affects a small number of the inspections conducted.

They speculate that one explanation for this finding is that it reflects the high stakes involved when deciding on an Inadequate verdict. Inspectors know and understand the consequences of this judgement for schools, including senior staff potentially losing their jobs. This means that some inspectors may simply find it too psychologically difficult to reach two Inadequate judgements in a row.

Professor John Jerrim – co-author on the study and former Special Advisor on research at Ofsted – warns that “evidence on potential biases in school inspections remains very limited”, adding:“ Although we have now provided some evidence on the issues of potential biases, there still is much to learn about inspections’ validity, consistency and reliability. It’s therefore pleasing to see Ofsted having a renewed focus on such issues.”

Co-authors Christian Bokhove and Sam Sims note how “while we have provided the first large scale investigation of sequential bias in school inspections, our efforts have to some extent been hampered by challenges with obtaining some of the data we need. Moving forward, it is imperative that Ofsted becomes more transparent, and opens up details about its inspection processes and outcomes to greater external scrutiny, for example through publishing training materials and making data available to independent researchers.”

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**Notes to editors**

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Working paper:

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A summary is in the final report:

Bokhove, C., Jerrim, J., & Sims, S. (2024, March 30). *Inspecting the Inspectorate: New insights into Ofsted inspections*. <https://doi.org/10.35542/osf.io/hr3u5>

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