

**Independent grammar school: Durham**  
**The arrival of low-cost private schooling to a developed nation**  
**Qasir Shah and Chris Holligan**

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**Abstract:** In 2018 James Tooley, and colleagues, launched a no-frills private school – the Independent Grammar School: Durham (IGSD). This offers full-time education for £58 per week per child (2019-20), in contrast to the markedly higher cost per capita in either the state sector or in established private schools. We question IGSD’s affordability and viability. We examine Tooley’s educational vision, and his work in the provision of low-cost private schooling in Africa and India to identify IGSD’s ontology to understand what no-frills might mean, and how this could be delivered.

**Keywords:** James Tooley; low-cost private schools; no-frills education.

**Introduction**

In England, the past twenty years have seen the introduction of a wide range of new forms of governance and management structures for state-funded schools. Before this, state-funded schools could be broadly classified according to the age range provided for: primary, or secondary comprehensive and grammar schools (in areas which retained these academically selective schools). Schools were under the control of a local education authority. In mainstream education, state-funded schools formed around 93 per cent of all establishments [1], with the balance of schools being independent: receiving no state funds, charging fees for attendance and often perceived as providing an elite education for the academically most able, although in fact only around half have an academically selective admissions policy (Henderson et al., 2020).

In contrast, around 48 per cent of all state-funded schools now operate under one of a range of alternative structures [2], receiving funding direct from the secretary of state for education and with greater flexibility regarding significant aspects of school management, including the ability to apply admissions criteria (though not for academic ability); teaching salaries and contracts; accepted teaching qualifications; term dates; the length of the school day [3]. In particular whilst these schools may choose to follow the national curriculum, many are not required to do so. Academised schools include faith schools, studio schools, free schools, and university technical colleges. Academies are run by single- or multi-academy trusts, and are particularly interesting because they may be supported by sponsors such as businesses, universities, other schools, faith groups or voluntary groups.

Over the last twenty years, the number of state-funded schools has fallen – from 31,883 in 2000-01 to 29,277 in 2018-19 (a fall of 2600 or 7.5 per cent) [4]. Although the number of establishments in the independent sector is unchanged overall, the sector has also seen change: growth (+7 per cent) in the early 2000s was followed by rapid contraction after the 2008 financial crisis. Further change has reduced the number of private schools from a peak of 2690 in 2009-10 to 2466 in 2018-19. Since 2000, the number of pupils in the UK has increased by 3 per cent to 10.4 million, but both the number and proportion educated in the private sector have fallen steadily from 631,800 (2000-01; 6.2 per cent) to 594,200 (2018-19; 5.7 per cent).

Notwithstanding the commercial pressures on the independent sector, one of the few new private schools to open in 2018 is of note: the Independent Grammar School: Durham (IGSD), established by James Tooley, John Gray and James Stanfield, which describes itself as a low cost *no-frills* private primary school. There are some (Croft, 2011; Miller, Craven and Tooley, 2014) who have been calling for a greater private-sector role in the management of state schools. IGSD is of strategic importance because politicians from cross-party affiliations agree that it would be difficult not to allow for-profit companies in state education should there be evidence to support this (See, 2012). This would require a change in the law, and hence a parliamentary debate, but it is not inconceivable that a political party with a sufficiently large majority in parliament could bring this about. An example of a dramatic change in educational policy that nearly succeeded was the 2016 white paper, *Education, Excellence, Everywhere*, which sought to force academisation on all remaining state-maintained schools. This was only averted because the then prime minister Theresa May lacked a sufficient parliamentary majority, and because of opposition from Conservative members of parliament and local councillors, (Shah, 2018, p220). In principle, a version of the white paper could be reintroduced, and there would then be but a small step to make these academies operate on a for-profit basis. The precedent already exists for a state-funded privatisation model: Sweden introduced an educational voucher system (*skolpeng*) in 1992, which enabled private schools to compete for students with public schools on an equal financial basis and with full public funding (Blomqvist, 2004); a move inspired by Friedman (1962) and Chubb and Moe (1990).

The primary aim of this paper is *not* to set out or to debate the issues of the justification or otherwise of private schooling, nor that IGSD will not provide a ‘quality’ schooling (an inspection by Ofsted, in 2019 graded IGSD ‘good’), but to question the feasibility of delivering a ‘quality’ education at the price proposed by IGSD. We explore the provision of low-cost private schools (LCPS) in Africa and India, to understand what no-frills might mean, and how it might be delivered.

### **James Tooley’s educational vision**

Tooley (1993; 1995; 1998; 2009) has been an ardent advocate of private education – in particular low-cost private schooling – for many years, citing the success of many LCPS in some of the poorest countries in Asia and Africa, even in war-torn countries such as Liberia and South Sudan (Tooley et al., 2017). Tooley himself is active in the provision of low-cost education and in 2009 co-founded the Omega Schools Franchise Ltd, a chain of low-cost private schools in Ghana comprising forty schools with 20,000 students, with significant investment from Pearson's Affordable Learning Fund. He has also created chains of low-cost private schools in Sierra Leone and India, and is the patron of AFED – the Association of Formidable Educational Development – in Nigeria, an association of 3000 low-cost private schools.

In an interview in 2013, Tooley stated that he wanted 'to see private schools emerge and then the state just move aside from education' (Wilby, 2013). He describes school chains reflecting notional brands such as *EasyLearn* or *Virgin Opportunity* which could be as ubiquitous as, say, Sainsbury's or Boots. In the following quote, Tooley plays upon values of competition and social mobility:

### **Welcome to EasyLearn, Class 1**

The unions are scaremongering. The present reforms are only toying with privatisation. To bring profit and fees into that system – now, that would be progress. What could it look like here? Gazing into my crystal ball, I see chains of learning centres carrying the distinctive bright orange logo of ‘easylearn’ competing with those sporting the red ‘V’ of ‘Virgin Opportunity’. Competition between these players would make good schooling affordable to all, accelerate the pace of learning innovation, and end the system mired in complacency and underperformance. I guess the unions would be right to be worried then. But parents and children could rest easy, and grasp the new opportunities offered. (Tooley, 2006, in Ball, 2007, p62.)

This echoes the arguments of Adam Smith and R. T. Malthus that competition is healthy in keeping teachers responsive to their pupils (see West, 1964, pp164-170). It also constructs the privilege and distinction that may appeal to parents disaffected with state provision. Tooley envisages a ‘pioneering’ private education that *feigns* simplicity and ease of accessibility, and by his contextualisation elicits knowledge (and class prejudices) that he anticipates are shared by his customers. This model, ‘Welcome to Easy Learn, Class 1’, represents one example of educational choice progressing by capitalising on existing commercial brands to construct ‘no-frills’ education for all as a new norm.

The antecedents of no-frills education, and clues as to how IGSD might deliver this, lie in Tooley’s involvement in Africa and India, and his underlying belief of providing ‘adequate’ education for all, a concept which justifies inequalities, and which he thinks could be met through the market (Tooley, 1993). In countering Bernard Williams’ (1962) objection to inequality of education provision, Tooley uses the example of the health sector to make his case. He says:

The richer person could be treated in plush surroundings, with many luxuries, by very eminent highly paid consultants. The poorer person could be treated in a large ward, without any luxuries, by less eminent and hence cheaper medical practitioners. But as long as both treatments were adequate to deal with the patient's ill health, it seems that Williams couldn't object to the inequality. (Tooley, 1993, p155).

Tooley then extends his argument to education, stating that as long as one guarantees an adequate education for all, no one would have any cause for complaint, especially if this notion of adequate included: ‘things such as basic skills and knowledge in order to live in a democratic, industrialised society, and sufficient intellectual and artistic stimulation to ensure that the abilities of all are brought to the surface and encouraged’ (Tooley, 1993, p155).

Tooley’s conceptualisation of adequate education (IGSD’s notion of no-frills education) borrows from Frankfurt’s (1987) concept of ‘enough’, or ‘sufficient’ education. Frankfurt argues that sufficiency rests on the principle that everyone ought to have enough. This is the level at which the person no longer desires ‘an active interest in getting more’. This may seem reasonable, although ‘[w]hatever level we judge to be appropriate, it always makes sense to ask as Richard Arneson does: “Why

there and not higher?’” (2005, in Marples, 2018, p 27). However, to explore this topic further would be outside the remit of this paper.

What worries us about the idea of a no-frills ‘adequate’ education is Tooley’s (1998) altogether different conceptualisation of the provision of education than the present norm; for him education is a tradeable private good, meaning that what is traded is not education per se but the ‘opportunities to become educated’. Whether you take these opportunities to learn, or not is up to you. This, as Sarangpani (2009, p69) informs us, means that ‘the onus on the private provider is only the provision of education, and not the responsibility or task of ensuring that children become educated’. Such a conceptualisation makes us worry about the quality of education that would be offered at IGSD. That is, should we accept the purpose of education, in its normal parlance as that of ‘the preparation of the young for life’ – ‘a life in society’ (Sarangapani and Winch, 2010, p500), notwithstanding the fact that what that adult life may or should be is open to dispute.

Nevertheless, we cannot remain indifferent to the quality of education provided to all members of society because ‘[t]he quality of that society and its institutions are also affected by the quality of education of individuals within it’, and that education therefore is not merely a private good but also a public one (2010, p500). We remain sceptical of IGSD’s aspiration of providing an adequate (no-frills) education, but one which is comprehensive; this aspiration does not square with the affordable fee that is charged.

### **Independent affordable education**

We next explore the workings of LCPS in Africa and India, and the reasons for their popularity, to gain further insight into IGSD’s low-fee model, and the quality of provision. LCPS in Africa and India have seen a marked increase in their popularity (Heyneman and Stern, 2014), which can partly be attributed to:

- Perceived ‘better’ quality of provision compared to state schools (Dixon and Tooley, 2012). For example, in India an assessment of ‘value for money’ found that LCPS offered between two and a half to twelve times better value than their public counterpart (Kingdon, 2017, p29). [5]
- Lower student-teacher ratios (Nishimura and Yamano, 2013).
- Greater accountability to parents, as parents can move their children (Härmä, 2013).
- Greater discipline (Zuilkowski et al., 2018).
- Reduced teacher absenteeism (Muralidharan et al., 2017). [6]
- LCPS can be less expensive than state schools (Heyneman and Stern, 2014).

How is this perceived ‘better’ quality of education in LCPS provided? To begin with, in comparison with state schools LCPS provide only basic resources (Strauss, 2016) delivered in poor facilities. They also hire unqualified staff who are low paid (Kingdon, 2017). Tooley, for example, admits hiring unqualified ‘teachers’ in Africa on low pay, for whom everything that they need is centrally created – lesson plans, workbooks, exercises – as well as a three-week teaching crash course (Wilby, 2013). They are then given a bank of lesson plans to deliver. This business model is similar to that found English as a foreign language (EFL) provision. In order to teach in most

EFL private schools around the world, native English speakers simply need a Bachelor's degree and the successful completion of an intensive four-week teaching course (for example, the CELTA Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages).

The above scenario is not that far removed: already in England, academies are exempt from the obligation to employ teachers holding the qualified teacher status (QTS) qualification; private schools are also exempt. This potentially is of concern because although at present this enables schools to meet short-term/emergency needs, this could change in an environment in which state schools have been suffering a decline in funding since 2010 (Sibieta, 2020, p9). One way to reduce costs would be to employ unqualified staff, especially for a low-cost private school wishing to make a profit. This would have repercussions for the quality of teaching provided: studies in the United States (Kane, Rockoff and Staiger, 2008; Clotfelter, Ladd and Vigdor, 2010) and in England (Martindale, 2019) highlight a positive correlation between teachers with teaching qualifications and greater effectiveness. Research also shows that pupils perform better with teachers who have more experience, more pedagogical training and greater subject knowledge (Kraft and Papay, 2014).

The situation in England is already of concern as the proportion of teachers without QTS is rising more rapidly in academies than in local authority maintained schools. Between 2011 and 2017, 'the percentage of teachers without QTS who have a degree declined from 81% to 66% in primary schools and from 85% to 78 % in secondary schools' (Martindale, 2019, p1020). It is not unreasonable to assume that the pedagogical training and subject knowledge of the remaining teachers will be significantly lower, and therefore they would be less effective than those with professional teaching qualifications and experience. Martindale also discovered that the inequality in access to QTS and non-QTS-qualified teachers is more pronounced in schools with poorer children.

Looking at IGSD, there is a hint that it too could employ unqualified teachers. There is sufficient latitude in the following quote from IGSD for this: 'We know that we will train and mentor our teachers well to deliver a sound, academically-rigorous education' (Tooley, 2017). However, the IGSD website emphasises that what makes a difference in education is not *money*, but *people*. 'The heart of our school and its defining characteristic will be the highest quality of teaching from teachers who simply love to be in the classroom with children.' [7] And naturally, non-QTS teachers are cheaper, at least 25 per cent cheaper in England (Department for Education, 2020).

India is an example which may point the way ahead for IGSD. In India, in a market already depressed by the oversupply of unemployed graduates, LCPS hire unqualified graduates as teachers at a 'market-clearing' income (Kingdon, 2020, p18), which is seven to nine times lower than that paid in government schools (Kingdon, 2017, p24). A problem of employing unqualified staff at 'market-value' pay is that, as corollary, these LCPS see a high turnover of staff, with the consequent disruption to the provision of teaching (Piper, King and Mugenda, 2016). These untrained teachers are filling time before they find better jobs. Although LCPS in India (and Africa) may be argued to provide 'better' quality education, this is relative to the poor education provided by the state (Tooley et al., 2017). However, this assessment of poor

education in state schools is not consistent across India and varies within and between regions (Mehrotra and Panchamukhi, 2006; NCERT, 2008). As Sarangapani and Winch (2010) explain, the situation in India is complex, whereas Tooley and colleagues generalise from studies conducted in a particular area of India (Hyderabad) amongst a specific and disproportionately marginalised community (Muslims) who attend private schools. The mother tongue and home language of most Muslims in Hyderabad is Urdu and, although this is taught to high-school level in state schools, it is neither the language of the market nor of the state of Andhra Pradesh. Fluency in Urdu therefore detracts from, rather than contributes to, the employment prospects of Muslims in Hyderabad. In contrast, being English-medium the local private schools allow this minority's children better employment prospects and entry to higher education. A desire to mitigate the effects of discrimination may explain why these parents send their children to private schools.

An additional reason why some parents may send their children to private schools could be due to 'exasperation' at the state's failings, rather than a desired preference. For example, Härmä (2013) found that parents in Lagos, Nigeria choose to send their children to private schools because they view government schools as failing. And though they are satisfied with these schools because they 'provide relatively good value for the fees that they must pay', they nonetheless 'complain of low-calibre, poorly-paid teachers as well as shoddy infrastructure and facilities' (Härmä, 2013, pp562-63). As Walford reminds us, the fact parents send their children to LCPS does not mean they want to do so: 'What parents actually want is well-functioning, well-staffed government schools, inspected regularly and rigorously to ensure accountability. They use these low-fee schools only reluctantly' (Walford, Natriello and Merrifield, 2010, p355).

The current underfunding of state schools in England (Sibieta, 2020) is leading to many schools being forced to ask for parental contributions. An annual parent survey reports that 43 per cent of parents have been asked for contributions to make up for the shortfalls, an increase from 38 per cent in 2019 (Parentkind, 2020, p7), with the inevitable consequence that schools were limiting their curriculum to focus on end-of-year tests 'rather than encouraging children to grapple with new mathematical concepts or encouraging them to read widely' (Amanda Spielman, in Adams, 2018).

Given such testing conditions, patience and trust can be lost in the state system, creating conditions propitious for the entry of low-cost private alternatives. Parents naturally worried about their children's education would be attracted by the terms 'independent' and 'grammar' given their positive association with quality of provision. But is it possible for IGSD to provide a comprehensive curriculum, including music and a foreign language, at the 'affordable' price offered? [8] For the 2019-20 academic year, average fees for a private day-school pupil at a junior school were £13,812 (ISC, 2020, p17); the per-pupil spend by the government in a state primary school was £5,200 (Sibieta, 2020, p2). The fee asked by IGSD per student is just £2,995 a year. [9] This is a rise of nearly £300 (11 per cent) compared with 2018, with IGSD's website stating that costs are 'likely' to rise in line with the consumer price index each year.

IGSD's long-term sustainability can be questioned – to employ even one newly qualified teacher full time costs circa £28,500 p.a. [10] This would require enrolling

9.5 pupils; in 2019 Ofsted reported the school to have eleven pupils, with ‘two teachers, a part-time teacher and a teaching assistant’. [11] To this must be added the administrative costs and overheads of running a school. It was reported in early 2020 that IGSD now has twenty-five pupils and that Tooley anticipates IGSD will ‘break even’ in 2021, when he expects student numbers to rise to forty (Dickens, 2020). It is questionable how IGSD could offer both quality and an extensive curriculum at the price currently charged given that many state schools in England, with higher per capita funding, have difficulty in maintaining their curricula.

Although IGSD is currently providing a broad curriculum, the future quality of such provision is uncertain. IGSD itself states that its no-frills education will not engage in a ‘race to the top’, as ‘[t]his ... involves constant, unsustainable investment which, in our opinion, is contributing to the increasing unaffordability of private education for all but the richest in our society.’ [12] Such language leaves ample latitude for IGSD to limit the curriculum, and to increase fees later, perhaps citing rising costs, and ‘extras’. IGSD has already raised school fees by just over 10 per cent compared with the initial offering of £2,700 (£52 per week) in its first academic year 2018-19. We believe Tooley’s argument from India seeks to adapt this low-cost model to England for a parallel demographic of poorer families disenchanted with state-education provision.

### **Conclusion**

Should IGSD demonstrate that a *no-frills* education – a rather truncated notion of private education – can be delivered at a budget price, then it could pave the way for academies being run for profit, and thereby reverse the state intervention in the provision of schooling for all that began with the 1870 Elementary Education Act. Should IGSD flourish, the public could be reoriented toward the idea of paying for schooling as a normative expectation. They may come to accept that, like supermarkets, schools offer different levels of quality, and will act within that mindset. Parents will not understand the quality of education provided, or what an adequate education should constitute, as they are participants in the *mise-en-scène*. The knowledge necessary to make an informed decision about the quality of education provision itself depends on the education that one has received, and it is doubtful the parents that IGSD aims at have such specialist knowledge.

Although IGSD offers an extensive curriculum, it is difficult to see how this could be sustained, unless it hires cheaper unqualified staff (as in India and Africa). The reality of LCPS in developing countries reveals schools staffed by unqualified teachers, using rote memorisation techniques (Tooley and Dixon, 2003), with basic resources, delivering basic curricula in basic premises. Do we really wish to transpose a model in which unqualified teachers are trained to deliver a curriculum in a specified way? A high-quality education, or even an ‘adequate’ education, is not inexpensive; to pretend that it could be delivered at a fraction of even state-school funding is questionable, even mischievous.

Do we really want such a vital profession to be a poorly paid one – attracting the ‘occasional’ teacher who takes up the job while waiting for something better, rather than those who are passionate about the profession, seeing it as their vocation? This would be a regressive move, a consequence of which could be the deprofessionalisation of the teaching profession; it certainly would not be value for

money, assuming we do desire properly qualified and trained teachers capable of providing children with ‘worthwhile learning and development experiences and opportunities’ (Sarangapani, 2009, p68). Parents not only want to know what opportunities their children are provided with at school, but also that they are in addition educated (Sarangapani and Winch, 2010, p503). Tooley’s radically different conceptualisation of education as ‘educational opportunity’ makes us anxious about the quality of education that can be offered in the long run. Ultimately, Tooley’s concept of education as opportunity absolves a school from the responsibility to actually educate the child.

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### Notes

1. UK Education and Training Statistics, [www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-education-and-training](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-education-and-training)
2. 36 per cent of primary schools and 78 per cent of secondary schools are now academised (October 2020), [www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development)
3. [www.gov.uk/types-of-school](http://www.gov.uk/types-of-school)
4. UK Education and Training Statistics, [www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-education-and-training](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-education-and-training)
5. However, see Chudgar & Quin (2012) who have questioned there being any advantage of cost per student for outcomes.
6. Although see Tooley & Dixon (2003) who found relatively high levels of absenteeism in private unrecognised unaided (PUU) schools compared to government ones.
7. [www.igsdurham.com/why-igs](http://www.igsdurham.com/why-igs)
8. [www.igsdurham.com/curriculum](http://www.igsdurham.com/curriculum)
9. [www.igsdurham.com/fees](http://www.igsdurham.com/fees)
10. Including employers’ national insurance contributions and minimum stakeholder pension contributions.
11. Ofsted, March 2019, [reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/27/144804](https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/27/144804)
12. [www.igsdurham.com/why-igs](http://www.igsdurham.com/why-igs)

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**Qasir Shah** has taught English language for over twenty-one years, initially in China, Japan and Taiwan, and for the last seventeen years to adults in England. He also teaches English for academic purposes to graduate students, and is currently a PhD candidate in philosophy of education at Institute of Education, UCL.  
**qasir.shah.14@ucl.ac.uk**

**Chris Holligan** left school at fifteen with no qualifications. After odd jobs he became a ski instructor teaching in the Alps. When a serious accident ended that life, he took Scottish Highers part-time at an FE college and A levels by correspondence gaining entry to York University. He trained as a secondary school teacher: following two years in the classroom he won a studentship for a Master's in Education and Psychology at Aberdeen, and an MRC studentship for a PhD at St Andrews. He holds a personal chair in education at the University of the West of Scotland.  
**chris.holligan@uws.ac.uk**