

Governments that are serious about attracting the best people to work in their state education systems must look not only at the salaries they offer but also at the social standing of teachers. **Peter Dolton** presents the results of the first global comparison of teachers' status in society.

The status of teachers

In the debate about how to improve educational attainment, the role of teachers is paramount. Indeed, it has become widely accepted in recent years that attracting good quality and well-qualified people into teaching is a pre-requisite for raising standards. In Finland and Singapore, for example, where standards are highest, teachers are recruited from the most qualified graduates, all with at least a second degree.

One obvious way that these countries have attracted the best and brightest into teaching is by paying them well. My research – summarised in the Autumn 2011 *CentrePiece* (Volume 16, Issue 2) – has demonstrated the link between the level of teachers' salaries and a country's educational performance.

The influence of teacher status – the social and cultural forces that determine how much we respect teachers – is harder to measure. But it is vital to do so since the brightest graduates, those who are in demand from the best employers, are unlikely to want to join a profession that is publicly denigrated or seen as a second-best option.

There have been many international comparisons of educational performance, including the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

But teacher status has never been examined in any comprehensive way. It is common for people to remember a vanished halcyon age when teachers were respected or to feel that their own country alone has stopped giving teachers the respect that they deserve. But until now, there has been very little evidence to substantiate these perceptions.

Aware of this gap, the Varkey GEMS Foundation commissioned me to oversee the *2013 Global Teacher Status Index*, the first large-scale international comparison of the status of teachers. The same questions were put to around 21,000 people across 21 countries in Asia, the Americas, Europe and the Middle East.

To gauge the social standing of teachers, we invited respondents to rank teachers against other professions, such as doctors, lawyers, librarians, nurses and social workers. We also asked for views on how much, in a fair world, teachers

should be paid. And we posed a question that goes to the heart of attitudes towards teachers: would you encourage your own child to become a teacher? The survey responses were then condensed into the global index, with rankings for each of the 21 countries.

The results are not entirely predictable. Teachers have the highest status in China and Greece and the lowest in Brazil and Israel. The United States and most European countries, including the UK, rank halfway down the index. But the UK comes higher than most other European countries – including Finland – as well as other countries with a similar level of GDP per capita, such as France and Germany.

As in most of the countries surveyed, people in the UK were most likely to compare teachers to nurses and social workers and around a quarter would encourage their child to become a teacher – which, though low, is higher than the

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proportion in Finland, France and Germany. And the UK's secondary school teachers have the highest status among all European countries polled.

So why do the UK's teachers have a comparatively higher status than in other European countries? It is hard to be definitive but UK teachers do earn more than in many European countries – including France, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Yet many countries pay their teachers more than in the UK and some, like Finland, reap the reward from higher pay in terms of better pupil performance while others, such as Germany, do not.

Second, UK education has focused heavily on targets in recent years, so there is a general understanding that teaching has become a very demanding job. And third, the relative success of the UK could be more to do with the unhappy mood in France and Germany, where there have been intense public debates about the quality of their education systems. After both countries performed disappointingly in the PISA rankings, there has been a bout of national navel-gazing that has not happened in the UK – and this may have adversely affected the status of teachers.

Another finding for the UK is that the status of head teachers is higher than in any other country. This is perhaps because of the recent phenomenon of the 'super-head' and the idea of head teachers as 'agents of change' in the education system. In many other countries, there is a notable cultural difference, with head teachers seen more as administrators than pedagogical leaders.

What about the role of teaching unions? It may come as a surprise that UK opinion is split on whether they should have a greater or lesser role in determining teachers' pay and conditions. Over 40% of people say that unions have too little influence whereas fewer than 30% say that they have too much influence. Perhaps this is because the unions have not been involved in high profile industrial action that the public has noticed for many years – despite recent regional strikes. This probably contributes to teachers being more popular in the UK than in France and the United States, where there has been more recent union unrest.

In most countries surveyed, there is a clear pecking order: head teachers are respected most, followed by secondary

school teachers and then primary school teachers. The exceptions are France, China, Turkey and the United States, where primary school teachers are respected more than their secondary school colleagues. In most countries, the public feels that teachers should have higher salaries – though in France, Japan and the United States, the view is that they should be paid less. And at least a half of all people polled support performance-related pay for teachers.

In two thirds of the countries surveyed, teachers are most likely to be compared to social workers. In the United States, teachers are most often compared to librarians – perhaps because libraries are located next to schools in many American towns. Librarians and social workers are in the bottom half of our occupational status ranking, so these comparisons show that there is a long way to go before teachers are thought of in

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the same bracket as lawyers and doctors, who come out top of our ranking.

But the starkest differences are between East and West. Teachers in China, Egypt, Singapore, South Korea and Turkey have a higher status than in the United States and every country surveyed in Europe with the exception of Greece. In European countries, between a fifth and a quarter of people tend to think that pupils respect teachers – compared with 75% in China.

Fewer than 20% of Germans would encourage their child to become a teacher compared with nearly 50% of people in China. Out of all the countries surveyed, only Chinese people tend to compare teachers with doctors. Here, cultural issues may be at work: teaching seems to be treated with more reverence in Asian societies, especially in China. And while doctors in China may not have quite the highest ranking of all occupations, as they

do in Europe, it is still one of the most prestigious jobs.

These findings have an important message for governments in these times of austerity. There is no clear link between teacher status and pupil outcomes. A large part of the reason for this is that occupational status is indistinguishable from remuneration in some countries whereas it is entirely distinct from pay in other countries.

The upshot is that governments cannot expect that improving the status of teachers will lead to better pupil outcomes without, at the same time, making teachers well remunerated. Presenting teaching as a vocation in which social respect is the only reward is doomed to failure. There is no 'free lunch' for governments that want teachers to do 'more for less'.

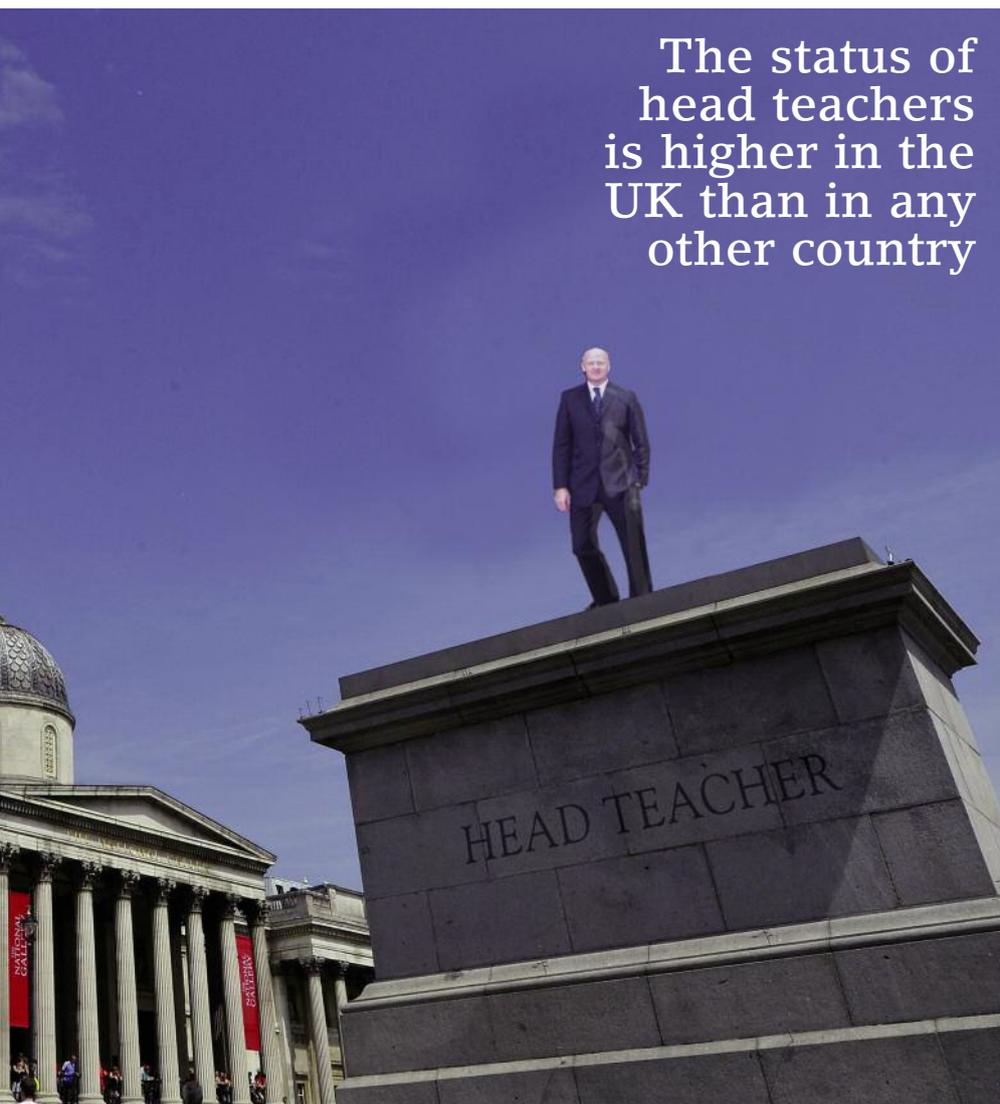
But this is not necessarily a straightforward demand to increase the

pay of all existing teachers. What we want is for the profession to become more attractive to our brightest graduates, who will be able to get the best from pupils. We will only be able to attract them if teaching is seen as both a highly paid and high status profession.

My own view is that in the UK, we will not improve the status of teachers until teaching is properly recognised as a profession. Lawyers and doctors have their own professional bodies such as the Law Society and the General Medical Council (GMC). These organisations represent their professions but also regulate the conduct of their members. If a doctor is found to have compromised professional standards, the GMC can take sanctions against them. These bodies are therefore respected in a way that unions are not because they are seen as being on the side of the public. In addition, a professional body of this kind for teaching may deflect the criticisms of politicians who often blame teachers for the ills of education and wider society.

Others will have different ideas for how to raise the status of teaching. By publishing this index, we hope to encourage a debate – from education ministries to staff rooms – about how we bring about the transformation in teacher status that the next generation needs and which teachers themselves deserve.

The status of head teachers is higher in the UK than in any other country



This article summarises the *2013 Global Teacher Status Index* by Peter Dolton and Oscar Marcenaro-Gutierrez, published by the Varkey GEMS Foundation (<https://www.varkeygemsfoundation.org/teacherindex>).

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