Multi-academy trusts: benefits, challenges and functions

An investigation into multi-academy trusts: how their central vision and approaches influence day-to-day practice in schools, and to what extent they are having a positive or otherwise impact on the work of leaders and teachers in the schools we inspect.

Contents

Introduction

1. Since 2002, the academy programme has been a central part of the education system and of successive governments' plans for raising educational standards. A focus on the challenge of failing or under-subscribed schools and under-performance meant that new academies, linked to a government-approved sponsor, replaced these schools,[1] taking them out of local authority (LA) control. The National Audit Office reports that there were over 1,100 approved sponsors in January 2018.[2]

2. The Academies Act 2010[3] made academy status open to all schools, subject to Department for Education (DfE) approval. Since that time, the number of academies has rapidly increased. Furthermore, while initially most academies were standalone, a growing number have become part of multi-academy trusts (MATs). Though most MATs are small, they vary greatly in size (from as few as two to well over 50 schools).

3. A MAT is often described as a 'collaborative' of schools. However, this understates the legal status of a MAT, which is quite different from that of other forms of school collaboratives, such as federations. In a MAT, it is the trust itself that is the legal entity, and not the schools that are its constituents. This means that the MAT has responsibility for the governance of its schools, although MATs may delegate specific powers to local governing bodies (LGBs). The MAT is accountable for the performance of each school in the group. A master funding agreement with the MAT and supplemental funding agreements with each individual academy are signed by the Secretary of State for Education.

4. Not all academies belong to MATs. Many academies are standalone academies. However, standalone academies may struggle with capacity to manage change and to develop the school. Therefore, the DfE has encouraged schools to become part of MATs, which are seen as having clear benefits in terms of both improving standards and increasing financial efficiencies and sustainability.[4] If Ofsted has judged a maintained school's overall effectiveness as inadequate, the school receives a directive academy order and must become a sponsored academy. Ninety-eight per cent of schools that are given a directive academy order join a MAT.

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[1] MS Gibbons, and O Silva, 'What's in a name? Expectations, Heuristics and Choice During a Period of Radical School Reform', in 'CEP', 1477, 2017.
[2] 'Annual Report and Accounts', NAO, 2018-19; www.nao.org.uk/report/nao-annual-report-and-accounts-2018-19-2.
[3] 'Annual Report and Accounts', NAO, 2018-19; www.nao.org.uk/report/nao-annual-report-and-accounts-2018-19-2.
[4] 'Multi-academy trusts: good practice guidance and expectations for growth', DfE, 2016; www.gov.uk/government/publications/multi-academy-trusts-establishing-and-developing-your-trust.

5.   About 35% of all state-funded maintained schools are now academies.[5] This figure masks considerable differences between LAs and across phases. For example, the proportion of secondary schools that are now academies was 72% in 2018, much higher than for primary schools (27%) and special schools (34%). In individual Las, the proportion of schools that are academies ranges from 93% in Bromley to 6% in Lancashire, Lewisham and North Tyneside.[6] In 2017, almost three quarters of academies were part of a MAT.[7]

6.   When they convert to an academy, schools take on several duties and responsibilities as well as a number of freedoms compared with maintained schools. Academies meet these responsibilities either by converting to a single standalone convertor academy, by forming a new MAT or by joining an existing MAT. Governance and accountability of the academy become the responsibility of the trust and its trustees. These accountabilities are financial as well as educational. For example, academies are allowed more freedom to set staff pay and conditions and to determine their own curriculum than LA-maintained schools. Nonetheless, the curriculum must be broad and balanced, and the academy's provision must meet all a school's statutory duties, such as keeping children safe and complying with the Equality Act 2010.

7.   Ofsted has a duty to inspect academies under section 5 of the Education Act 2005.[i8] We do not inspect MATs, although we do carry out MAT summary evaluations of the quality of education provided by a MAT and leaders' contribution to this. In doing so, we draw on previous inspections of individual academies within a MAT as well as meetings and discussions with MAT leaders about these 'batched inspections'. These summary MAT evaluations are carried out in line with the letter from the Secretary of State for Education to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector on 13 December 2018.[9] We have also recently published guidance for both inspectors and MATs about these.[10] The summary evaluations are not inspections but aim to make helpful recommendations as to how MATs might improve further.

8.   In our MAT summary evaluations, Ofsted aims to consider all important information about the MAT; from academy inspections, discussions with MAT leaders and on-site visits to MAT academies. We then use this to provide the MAT with helpful recommendations on aspects that could be improved, and to

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[5] 'Annual Report and Accounts', NAO, 2018-19; www.nao.org.uk/report/nao-annual-report-and-accounts-2018-19-2.
[6] 'Annual Report and Accounts', NAO, 2018-19; www.nao.org.uk/report/nao-annual-report-and-accounts-2018-19-2.
[7] A West and D Wolfe, 'Academies, the School System in England and a Vision for the Future', in 'ERG LSE', 23, 2018; www.lse.ac.uk/social-policy/research/research-reports/Academies-the-School-System-in-England-and-a-Vision-for-the-Future.
[8] 'Education Act', UK Legislation, 2005; Section 5; www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/section/5.
[9] 'Education Act', UK Legislation, 2005; Section 5; www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/18/section/5.
[10] 'Multi-academy trusts: summary evaluations', Ofsted, 2018; www.gov.uk/government/publications/multi-academy-trusts-summary-evaluations.

recognise when MAT leaders are having a positive impact on the quality of education in the individual academies. MAT summary evaluations are carried out across two stages. In Stage 1 (batched inspections) Ofsted collects evidence about the individual academies within the MAT through the section 5 and section 8 inspections that are already due, usually in a single term. These inspections follow the procedures set out within the relevant handbooks. After Stage 1 we publish all section 5 and section 8 inspection reports before Stage 2 commences. In Stage 2 (the summary evaluation), which may be in the same term or the term after we complete the batched inspections, inspectors will meet the leaders of the MAT and discuss the findings of the individual inspections and overall educational quality across the MAT, over the course of a week. Inspectors will also meet trustees. There will be an opportunity for inspectors to visit individual academies or sites with the MAT's agreement. These visits are not inspections, and it is important to note that summary evaluations are also not inspections. Ofsted does not have the power to insist that MATs engage with summary evaluations.

Background to this project

9. This research project reflects Ofsted's determination for its inspection and evaluation work to be evidence-based and research-informed. We began the project in the summer term of 2018. Feedback from both MATs and their schools – and indeed from our inspectors – indicated that not everyone understood how diverse the sector had become in terms of governance and organisational structures. We want our inspectors to be up to date and informed about MATs so that we fulfil our responsibilities and duties in relation to both MAT summary evaluation and school inspection even more effectively.

10. The growth of MATs has led to a range of academic research on their impact, and, to a lesser extent, their functioning (see for example Francis et al, 2016;[11] Andrews, 2016;[12] Finch et al, 2016;[13] Greany and Higham, 2018;[14] Andrew and Perera; 2017[15] and Greany 2018[16]).

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[11] B Francis and M Hutchings, 'Chain effects 2017', The Sutton Trust, 2017; www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/chain-effects-2017-academies.
[12] J Andrews, 'School performance in multi-academy trusts and local authorities – 2015', Education Policy Institute, 2016; https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/school-performance-multi-academy-trusts-local-authorities.
[13] A Finch, B Dobson, E Fischer and A Riggs, 'Academy chains unlocked', Reform, 2010; https://reform.uk/research/academy-chains-unlocked.
[14] T Greany and R Higham, 'Hierarchy, markets and networks: analysing the 'self-improving school-led system' agenda in England and the implications for schools', UCL Institute of Education, 2018; www.ucl-ioe-press.com/books/education-policy/hierarchy-markets-and-networks.
[15] J Andrew and N Perera, 'The Impact of academies on educational outcomes', Education Policy Institute, 2017; www.epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/impact-academies-educational-outcomes.
[16] T Greany, 'Sustainable improvement in multi-school groups', UCL Institute of Education, 2018; www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainable-improvement-in-multi-school-groups.

11. However, although there is burgeoning body of knowledge about central vision and approaches within MATs, we know less about how these influence day-to-day practice in schools, and to what extent MATs are having a positive or otherwise impact on the work of leaders and teachers in the schools we inspect.

12. This research project therefore set out to answer three questions:

  ■ What are the main functions of a MAT?

  ■ What does it mean for a school to be part of a MAT?

  ■ What are the implications for inspector training and inspection practice and guidance?

13. The study was not designed to evaluate the work of individual MATs. We wanted to hear the views of those who work within a MAT about what it meant to them to be part of one. In particular, we asked them about the benefits and challenges of being part of a MAT, things they wished the MAT did more of, or less of, and what were the most important things a MAT should do.

14. In addition, we wanted to identify similarities or differences in the approaches that MATs took to areas such as quality assurance, determining the curriculum and teaching and learning. Finally, we were also interested in the reasons why schools had joined a specific MAT.

15. The methodology for the research is explained in more detail later in this report. It is important, however, that we state from the beginning that we do not pretend to have a totally representative sample of MATs. We visited MATs with five or more academies, including some large national MATs. Key informants suggest that the need to establish systems and structures more formally 'kicked in' once a MAT had grown to five or more schools and that these had to be revisited once the MAT had expanded beyond eight or nine schools. This makes these larger MATs crucial to understanding their role in schools on inspection, as it is likely to be at this inflection point that there is a material distinction between the MAT and the schools that form part of it.

Methodology

16. Ofsted has an established process for setting up, monitoring, carrying out and reporting on our research projects. The process is informed by best practice identified for research projects and by our own aims, values, procedures and risk management processes. This project was set up in line with these procedures, following the approved ethics and scoping process and the establishment of an expert advisory panel. A literature review as well as wider discussions informed our questions and decision-making about the methodology.

17. This project used a qualitative case study methodology to give us an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of school leaders and teachers on what being part of a MAT means. The primary data collection method was interviews, supplemented by documentary analysis of inspection reports and data on the schools and MATs visited. As a qualitative study, the findings from this research are not intended to be statistically generalisable to the population of schools or MATs. They are, rather, intended to provide insight into the sector.

18. The project was co-constructed between the research team and the inspectorate. This meant that the research was carried out by a joint team of researchers and inspectors, and co-led by a research lead and an inspector lead.

Sampling

19. We used a maximum variation sampling approach to select a large sample of MATs and schools within them. In each MAT, we selected three schools, again using a maximum variation approach. The final sample visited consisted of 41 MATs and 121 schools. Of the 41 MATs, five were national chains, 20 consisted of 11 schools or more, and the remaining 16 had between five and 10 schools. In addition, we wished to include MATs with specific characteristics, for example:

   ■ where a special school was leading the MAT

   ■ diocesan chains

   ■ recently formed MATs or older more established MATs

   ■ MATs that had some sponsor-led academies

   ■ MATs that were mainly primary or mainly secondary

   ■ MATs incorporating school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT).

20. The MATs sampled were from all eight Ofsted regions.[17]

21. In sampling the schools, we also wanted to ensure that the schools we visited represented the range of diversity within the sector. We considered features such as:

   ■ inspection judgement at their last inspection where available

   ■ sponsor-led and converter academies

   ■ the balance of urban and rural schools and geographical region

   ■ social deprivation

   ■ different types of schools, for example primary, secondary, all-age schools, free schools and special schools

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[17] www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about.

- the length of time within the MAT.

22. In tables 1 and 2, we can see that the majority of schools in the sample were academy converters, and that the schools represent a broad range of Ofsted grades, with a slight over-representation of outstanding and previously inadequate schools.

Table 1: school types in the final sample of schools visited

School type	Number of schools
Academy converter	70
Academy special converter	3
Academy special sponsor-led	2
Academy sponsor-led	45
Free school	1
Total	121

Table 2: current inspection grades of schools in the sample

Inspection grade	Current grade	Previous grade for those without a current grade
1 (outstanding)	30	2
2 (good)	56	1
3 (requires improvement)	12	5
4 (inadequate)	N/A	15
Total	98	23

Who we talked with

23. In each MAT, we interviewed a mixture of MAT and school leaders. As well as senior leaders and governors at both MAT and school levels, we also interviewed middle leaders in schools. In total, we interviewed 41 MAT chief executive officers (CEOs), 121 headteachers, over 100 local governors, over 350 middle leaders, and 60 representatives from MAT boards (one or two from each board). In total, we gathered evidence from over 700 interviewees.

Tools used

24. The project gathered qualitative information through semi-structured interviews with MAT leaders and school leaders and staff. We asked each group or individual very similar questions so that we could triangulate responses.

25. We asked them about the functions of MATs and the MAT's role in several aspects of school life, such as the curriculum, behaviour and exclusions, teaching and learning, leadership, continuing professional development and recruitment. We also asked them about the benefits and challenges or drawbacks of being part of a MAT.

26. The questions for each group were piloted and revised following a pilot visit to a MAT and its schools. Quality assurance of the project was through joint training of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and researchers, and through audio-recording of a small number of interviews and/or joint visits to a proportion of MATs and their schools by two HMI or an HMI and a researcher. This enabled us to be secure about the reliability of information gathered. Because a lot of this recording and many of the visits were done early in the project, we could have 'live checks' that questions were eliciting the information we were hoping for and any emergent trends.

Analysis

27. We analysed the qualitative data using a thematic coding strategy agreed as a starting point, but then modified it as necessary as new themes emerged. HMI and researchers involved in the visits also wrote their own reflections at the end of the project on what they had learned and what they felt were the common features and differences expressed by leaders and staff in the different MATs they visited.

Results

28. The following findings emerged from the data.

There is both commonality and variance in the functions of MATs in the system

All MATs in the sample fulfilled a number of key common functions…

29. There are some core functions that almost all MATs appear to carry out. This includes what might be termed 'back office support' such as finance, premises and building support, training for safeguarding and health and safety.

30. All have a role in quality assuring the work of their schools. However, the extent to which they are directly involved in quality assuring the work or contributing to the further development of their schools varies widely. The amount of contact individual schools within MATs have with each other also varies considerably.

… but there was also a great deal of variation in what MATs did

31. At one extreme, there are MATs that appear to carry out 'health checks' but play little formal role in assuring the quality of the curriculum, teaching and learning, or behaviour. There are few formalised MAT-wide systems in place. Links between schools are informal and may be based on pre-existing relationships.

32. In contrast, some MATs play a central role in directing almost all aspects of school life. They have MAT-wide priorities for development that all the MAT's schools are expected to embrace. MAT-wide policies are in place for curriculum

development, teaching and learning, and behaviour. MAT-wide continuous professional development (CPD) reinforces the MAT's preferred approach and middle and senior leader networks form a significant layer of MAT support. This means that there is considerable alignment between schools in curriculum, assessment and behaviour management. Movement of staff between schools is frequent.

33. In between these two extremes, there are MATs that vary in the extent to which they direct back office and more academic interventions and provide a range of central services. Our research found that the level of autonomy a school had within a MAT did not determine how staff and school leaders felt about a MAT. Their focus was on the benefits for children. In more centralised MATs, headteachers or principals often saw the loss of autonomy as a necessary trade-off compared with what they thought staff and pupils gained from being part of the MAT.

34. This variation in the extent of centralisation of MATs echoes findings from previous studies that have attempted to categorise MATs along a centralised–decentralised axis or that have looked at the MAT's involvement in its schools. These studies have also found significant variation in the functions that MATs centralise, with different expectations of the schools within the MAT.[18],[19] Menzies et al (2018)[20] found that MATs differed significantly in terms of centralisation. At one end of the spectrum, some MATs aimed to achieve consistent teaching and learning. At the other end, in some MATs, schools retained complete autonomy. The extent of centralisation is related to the size (from small local MATs to large national chains) and vision (from having a strong central vision to a little central intervention on local autonomy) of the MAT. Collaboration between schools in the MAT is an asset or persuader for a school to convert to academy status and join a MAT. The benefits of collaboration, alongside autonomy to innovate, and the ability to leave trust boards to focus on strategy and operational matters being handled by the MAT are reasons for schools to become academies.[21]

What functions do MATs centralise?

35. In our study, we found that along a continuum, MATs have a tendency to standardise policies in some areas rather than in others.

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[18] T Greany and R Higham, 'Hierarchy, markets and networks: analysing the 'self-improving school-led system' agenda in England and the implications for schools', UCL Institute of Education, 2018; www.ucl-ioe-press.com/books/education-policy/hierarchy-markets-and-networks.
[19] L Menzies, S Baars, K Bowen-Viner, E Bernades, C Kirk, and K Theobald, 'MAT leadership and coherence of vision, strategy and operations', Ambition Institute, 2018; www.ambition.org.uk/research-and-insight/building-trusts.
[20] As above.
[21] R Cirin, 'Academy trust survey', Department for Education, 2017; www.gov.uk/government/publications/academy-trust-survey-2017.

36. Most schools that took part in our research have autonomy to create and implement their own **behaviour** policies. They generally welcomed these arrangements. Sometimes, school policies were based on a central template 'but tweaked to meet the needs of the community'. However, despite this autonomy, behaviour policies are usually expected to be underpinned by the MAT's strategy and shared values.

37. Apart from providing a shared set of expectations, MATs also give schools a range of support in dealing with behaviour. For example, in one school, parents raised behaviour as an issue, so the MAT provided support in refreshing behaviour management policies and staff CPD.

38. In many MATs, training on behaviour management is coordinated throughout the trust, which means that there is a common approach to dealing with behaviour. This consistency makes behaviour management more effective. Some MATs have developed further documentation to support this, such as whole-school behaviour audit/action plans. Often, MATs have a common electronic system to collect behaviour data. This allows the trust to collate a bigger, MAT-wide picture. However, it may also lead to additional workload, so MATs will need to be cautious in implementing this type of process and ensure that they do not collect unnecessary data.

39. Occasionally, the participants mentioned specific interventions carried out within the MAT, such as managed moves:

    'if individual challenging behaviours occur, we may consider a managed move within the MAT.'

40. Some also gave examples of working with other bodies, such as the LA. This was particularly the case in supporting pupils with special educational needs because LA provision was often more extensive than what MATs could provide on their own.

41. In line with legal requirements, school principals deal with **exclusions**. However, participants told us that in most MATs, rates of exclusions are regularly monitored by the trust:

    'the MAT does not dictate any particular approach, but it does monitor exclusion stats'

    and in another MAT:

    'the rate and trajectory of exclusions is one of the KPIs against which the CEO reports 3 times a year.'

42. A shared approach to exclusions allows exchange of expertise and ideas to help avoid exclusions and to find alternative and often preventative ways of dealing with this issue.

43. By contrast, in our study, few MATs standardised the **curriculum**, although many schools were increasingly working together on their curriculums at the time of the research project, recognising that their curriculum had been too narrow. Partnering with other schools in the MAT meant that there were additional extra-curricular and enrichment opportunities for pupils.

The origin and size of the MAT partially determine the functions of the trust

44. Some respondents saw MAT functions as the range of activities their MAT carried out. Many, however, set functions within the broader political and educational context. There were crucial differences dependent on the size of the MAT.

45. In schools that had established their own MAT and in converter academies, CEOs, trustees, local governors and principals emphasised that they wanted to be part of a 'family of schools' with similar values and ambitions to their own. This was often underpinned by a desire to be 'in charge of our own destiny' rather than being 'pushed into academy status' or directed to join another group.

46. These schools often joined with other local schools and saw one function of the MAT as creating a more continuous provision for pupils within their communities. They also saw the value of pooling resources, which enabled them to improve the quality of education for a wider range of pupils and needs in their area. Joint planning to meet pupils' varied needs was also seen as a main function of the MAT.

47. Those schools that had to become sponsored academies because of their prior performance had sometimes taken longer to arrive at this position, having gone through challenging times during the brokering process. However, they too talked about the moral imperative to give all children the best education. They also talked about 'families of schools' and the importance of shared aims and values. They viewed the other MAT schools and MAT central staff, where those existed, as resources to help them achieve that.

48. To a large extent, centralisation was related to size, in particular the number of pupils in the MAT. Growth requires a measure of standardisation across a MAT, as well as the centralisation of a range of services and functions, such as buildings and financial management, HR and ICT support.

While the MAT is central to the life of the school, local relationships can go beyond this

49. MATs in our study also differed with regards to their relationship with the LA and other schools in their locality.

50. Some MATs included working closely with the LA in their vision and had reached out to support schools and academies not in their MAT or gained

support from them.[22] MATs led by or including special schools often had a particularly close relationship with non-MAT schools and the LA, often providing support on a range of learning issues. Other schools cited the diminishing resources of LAs for providing services as being one reason why they decided to apply for academy status. Some MAT and school leaders saw their role as going beyond their MAT, detailing their outreach activities within the local, regional and national educational sphere.

51. Work with the LA was also mentioned in relation to special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND) provision. Many respondents saw LAs as better equipped for this than MATs.

Schools see a range of benefits to being part of a MAT…

52. Respondents in our project were generally very positive about being part of a MAT. They mentioned a number of advantages, many of which appear closely related to characteristics of effective MATs identified in previous research:

   ■ a distinct model of teaching and learning

   ■ a system for training teachers and other staff

   ■ deployment of staff across the chain

   ■ centralising resources and systems

   ■ geographical proximity.[23]

   Our interviewees mentioned the following in particular.

Back-office support

53. Interviewees said that back-office support available from MATs makes it possible for school leaders to focus on instructional leadership, while the central team takes care of finance, administrative functions and HR. Because the MAT can employ specialists, those functions can be managed in a smoother and more efficient way than headteachers felt they could do at school level. Headteachers appreciate the standard procedures and expertise provided:

   'all my IT issues have been sorted out in a timely way; we benefit from the expertise of an HR professional who runs a centralised HR process.'

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[22] R Cirin, 'Academy trust survey', Department for Education, 2017; www.gov.uk/government/publications/academy-trust-survey-2017.

[23] R Hill, J Dunford, N Parish, S Rea & L Sandals, 'The growth of academy chains: implications for leaders and leadership', National College of School Leadership (NCSL), 2012.

A recent study by the Ambition Institute[24] showed that MATs in which this back-office support allowed teachers to focus on teaching and learning had greater levels of staff retention.

Economies of scale

54. Headteachers also mentioned the advantages of the economies of scale that being part of a larger organisation can provide. Financial gains and economies of scale mean that there is a reduction in individual costs and more flexibility with the budget. MAT-wide contracts for things like cleaning and catering help reduce administration, cost and workload. Some headteachers also mentioned the ability of the MAT to appropriately target resourcing:

> 'the trust will give more when needed to support additional leadership where needed'.

Challenge and support

55. Headteachers and governors often related the challenge and support offered to the school by the MAT directly to school improvement. They valued the challenge of the reviews led by either the central team or a team of peers.

56. One headteacher pointed to the example where:

> 'aspirational targets have enabled us to stretch ourselves further to be in the top 20%. These aspirations had been translated into three-year strategic vision known and understood by staff and parents'.

Headteachers were generally positive about accountability in their MAT (see section on accountability below). Accountability was typically perceived as more thorough than what they had experienced before joining the MAT.

57. MATs gave support to their schools in a number of ways, such as through collaboration and expertise (see below), through common systems and policies, and also at times through allocating resources to those most in need of support.

58. Some MATS encouraged an element of competition between schools within the MAT. This was seen as motivating and leading to better performance.

Collaboration, sharing data and expertise

59. Both middle leaders and headteachers value the opportunity to share data with others and moderate it together:

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[24] L Menzies, S Baars, K Bowen-Viner, E Bernades, C Kirk, and K Theobald, 'MAT leadership and coherence of vision, strategy and operations', Ambition Institute, 2018; www.ambition.org.uk/research-and-insight/building-trusts.

> 'Common approaches to data enable shared expertise. We have a central team to analyse data, which makes our jobs as middle leaders much easier.'

This was linked to school accountability to the trust.

60. Leaders do not only feel challenged but supported, by both the process and the ready availability of peers and MAT central staff:

> 'knowing that there is always someone there to talk to and always some help to discuss and improve your practice is really helpful'.

61. In many MATs, the main benefit to the curriculum and consequently to teaching and learning came from opportunities for collaboration. This took several forms:

- providing subject expertise
- shared planning
- shared examples of good practice
- shared resources
- shared assessment and moderation
- broadening teachers' skills in foundation subjects such as: art, music, and PE
- developing buddying/mentoring systems to enhance teaching and learning.

62. The Ambition Institute study[25] found that, in some MATs, staff's experience and specialist knowledge were developed by moving staff to a role at the same level in another school.

63. Staff felt that pupils with SEND benefited particularly from pooled expertise. Other teachers then felt more confident in working with those pupils.

64. Some of the benefits of shared working only became apparent to schools after being part of the MAT for a certain period of time. Teachers and school leaders mentioned shared policies and cross-MAT competition as examples of practices that took some time to become embedded.

Workforce

65. Participants were very positive about the benefits to the workforce. These benefits encompassed four main areas and there was a strong relation between them:

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[25] L Menzies, S Baars, K Bowen-Viner, E Bernades, C Kirk, and K Theobald, 'MAT leadership and coherence of vision, strategy and operations', Ambition Institute, 2018; www.ambition.org.uk/research-and-insight/building-trusts.

- training/CPD/initial teacher training (ITT)/training for newly qualified teachers (NQTs)
- opportunities for staff/career progression/managing workload
- recruitment/retention
- leadership support/development.

66. Several MATs have developed their own initial teacher training courses, and this was seen to be a very important gain:

    'the single biggest achievement of the MAT has been to drive an ITT programme that has been an unmitigated success.'

67. These forms of training were then followed by a variety of opportunities for NQTs to further develop their skills. As well as being beneficial to new teachers, the participants pointed out that they also opened mentoring possibilities to more experienced educators.

68. The variety and quality of professional development provided by the MATs were highly appreciated and included subject- and area-specific courses and conferences.

69. Many MATs have a clear and well-developed progression model that staff value highly. Many spoke of talent spotting within their schools and helping staff onto the 'next steps of leadership potential'. The Ambition Institute research shows that MATs have much higher rates of promotion from classroom teacher to middle leadership, particularly at primary school, than non-MAT schools.[26] This is particularly the case in MATs that had put in place strong talent management programmes and opportunities for development.

70. According to some interviewees, these policies were having a positive impact on recruitment and retention of staff.

71. Some participants pointed out that adaptations made within the MAT reduced teachers' workload:

    'marking at the end of the year was negatively impacting teachers, so they've allowed us to take the assessments over a broader period rather than in the last 2 weeks of term'.

    This, however, was not the case in all MATs. Some of the respondents spoke about longer working hours required since joining a MAT.

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[26] L Menzies, S Baars, K Bowen-Viner, E Bernades, C Kirk, and K Theobald, 'MAT leadership and coherence of vision, strategy and operations', Ambition Institute, 2018; www.ambition.org.uk/research-and-insight/building-trusts.

72. The Ambition Institute (2019) study shows that the above potential benefits are not always realised, however. It also suggests that large MATs have relatively high levels of staff turnover.

...but they also identified drawbacks

73. Respondents also pointed to some disadvantages of the MAT model.

Financial arrangements

74. Overall, the most frequently mentioned drawbacks of belonging to a MAT were financial. Participants referred in particular to downsides to centralising finances. Often, this was to do with a large or changing top slice. These were a significant concern of governors:

   '3% of budget is paid to [the] MAT. Governors are not sure what they are getting for their funding. What is the money for?'

75. Tensions also arose from pooling finances across schools and central allocations of funding to schools. One principal noted that the reserve they had built up had been given to schools less careful.

76. It was not always clear that financial issues headteachers were worried about were specific to being part of a MAT. In many cases, they were seen as resulting from a general decline in budget or operating in a challenging financial climate.

Centralisation and loss of decision-making power

77. Schools commonly identified a loss of decision-making power as a drawback to belonging to a MAT, although how problematic they found this varied. Many schools said that the loss of control had been an initial concern that had never materialised. Schools sometimes saw the loss of autonomy as a necessary trade-off with what they gained from the MAT:

   'the big thing for me is not that we are in control but that we have the support we need.'

78. The amount of central intervention in a school, however, was often linked to school performance. One headteacher was concerned that if results did not improve, there would be a further loss of autonomy. Many MATs promised schools a great deal of continued autonomy at the point of joining, but not all schools felt these promises were kept. Many CEOs mentioned the tensions around decision-making power at the school and MAT levels. As one CEO put it, it could be a challenge to 'find the difficult sweet spot between autonomy and some measure of centralisation'.

79. Drawbacks of centralisation were more often identified by headteachers compared with other respondents. Some headteachers felt that moving these

responsibilities to a central team meant they did not get experience in finance or HR.

80. Middle leaders were the most likely to mention individual school needs as a drawback to belonging to a MAT. Some middle leaders told us that the make-up of the MAT did not reflect their school and that centralised policies and initiatives could therefore be unhelpful. By contrast, other middle leaders identified a lack of consistency in the MAT's approach as a drawback.

Slower decision-making in centralised structures

81. In some cases, school leaders felt there were difficulties in terms of how decisions were made. This was usually around the length of time a decision took. For example, they said that a centralised approach to recruitment meant that the process could be very drawn out. As one headteacher commented:

> 'I understand that in any organisation that wants consistency there must be a way of doing things – but to get it sometimes you have to go through some big loops. E.g. as a [head of department] HoD, you might have an idea that is slightly different, and you'd have to go through the subject leader before you can implement it. It's a supportive route but other schools might have a say on this quicker, or with their headteacher.'

Pressure for growth

82. Another concern of school and MAT staff, particularly in the smaller MATs, was the perceived pressure on MATs to expand and how this might impact on both autonomy and the MAT's ethos and organisation.

83. MATs in our sample had mixed views on growth and size. Evidence on the impact of growth on standards is unclear. Andrews[27] found that key stage 2 results in those MATs that have expanded rapidly were more likely to be above average in writing, less likely to be so in reading and in line with average for mathematics. There was no difference in results at key stage 4. Another recent study found somewhat better performance in smaller MATs, although the different composition of large and small MATs, with the latter more often containing low-performing schools on joining, complicates analysis.[28] MATs that have, at some point, expanded rapidly tend to have slightly higher levels of pupils who speak English as an additional language, pupils with low prior

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[27]J Andrews, 'Quantitative analysis of the characteristics and performance of multi-academy trusts', Education Policy Institute, 2017; www.epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/quantitative-analysis-characteristics-performance-multi-academy-trusts.

[28] D Bernardinelli, S Rutt, T Greany and R Higham, 'Multi-academy trusts: do they make a difference to pupil outcomes?', UCL Institute of Education, 2018; https://iris.ucl.ac.uk/iris/publication/1571848/1.

attainment and pupils eligible for the pupil premium than those MATs that have not expanded rapidly.[29]

84. Many MATS are on a new journey, with uncertainty about effective size. Leaders we talked with were clear about the challenges of growth within larger MATs, particularly when this results in academies that are widely dispersed geographically. Several CEOs noted that, during the early stages of the academisation programme, expansion was a priority. Some MATs were encouraged to take on a large number of schools in difficulty quickly, without always having the central capacity and leadership resource required to improve them. They felt that due diligence procedures were less robust than they might have been.

85. Growing pains were identified where growth had been quick. In a few MATs, senior leaders highlighted their uncertainties about what size was optimal. Others felt that a specific size was important to them. A number expressed anxieties that to grow further might compromise their 'community focus' or stretch the resources of the central team too thinly and therefore limit the quality of support made available:

> 'We have 25 schools now – one of my concerns was, if you look at failing schools and I looked at lots of MATs – they grew too quickly and there was rapid expansion, if they have lots of poor schools, so I was concerned where the slowdown was. The vulnerability is the capacity of key roles. People are fantastic, but now with 25 schools, if HR is not there? And safeguarding – where do we go? We need to be aware of what the tipping point might be; I can only know what works by reading what doesn't.'

86. While some therefore expressed doubts around growth, others saw major disadvantages to remaining small. Several participants also indicated that growth was an imperative if their MAT was to become a financially sustainable entity. Some smaller MATs (though all in this sample had at least five schools) felt that it was financially difficult to retain their small size. One CEO stated that 'economies of scale kick in at 5,000 pupils and the MAT is at 3,000'. Others felt that the MAT landscape is dominated by the larger MAT groups, and that being small limits some of the above-mentioned advantages of being part of a MAT, such as:

> 'we are not a big enough organisation to offer many career opportunities.'

87. Previous research has pointed to the benefits of scale. The 2016 white paper 'Educational excellence everywhere' identified that a size of, on average, 10 to 15 academies requires the MAT to develop centralised systems and functions to

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[29] J Andrews, 'Quantitative analysis of the characteristics and performance of multi-academy trusts', in Education Policy Institute, 2017; https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/quantitative-analysis-characteristics-performance-multi-academy-trusts.

deliver benefits. The rationale for this growth put forward by the government has been largely economic – for example, that larger MATs will secure economies of scale, more efficient use of resources, more effective management and clearer oversight of academies.

88. In 2016, Sir David Carter , the National Schools Commissioner, argued that:

> 'we need our existing MATs to grow' in order 'to be sustainable'.

In 2017, Lord Agnew, the minister responsible for academies, said that small MATs should merge together in order to achieve financial viability, arguing that:

> 'the sweet spot is perhaps somewhere between 12 and 20 schools, or something like 5,000 to 10,000 pupils'.

Sharing good practice is not always done efficiently or effectively

89. The second most common drawback associated with belonging to a MAT was the logistics of working together. Participants identified logistical drawbacks whether they were in a small MAT or a large national MAT. Getting everyone in the same place can be costly, time-consuming and frustrating, particularly if a school is an outlier in a MAT or the geographical spread of a MAT is wide. This was felt at all levels, from middle leaders to trustees. As one trustee stated:

> 'the geographical spread can be an issue. The spread can be the final straw in terms of effective school improvement. It's the distance you have to travel'.

90. Other schools feel that within their own MAT, they do not have much in common with some of the longer-established schools. They therefore look outside the MAT for expertise.

91. Some MATs are organising themselves into regional clusters to help manage these difficulties. The aim is, in part, to create localised peer-to-peer support and CPD networks and provide schools with a sense of belonging to an organisation that might otherwise appear remote and faceless.

92. Several MAT leaders anticipate reducing costs and demands on an often expensive and busy central team by sharing key staff, such as special educational needs coordinators and site managers, across schools that are reasonably near to each other. Executive principals are often appointed to create further leadership capacity across a cluster of schools. Some MATs ask each principal to commit a certain number of days per year to cross-MAT working.

93. Individual headteachers can feel conflicted between the desire to help other schools in the MAT by releasing staff to support them, and the concern that by doing so they might dilute the very quality of provision that others seek to emulate. This can be a concern when a MAT is, for example, secondary-

dominated and the few primaries within it are far away from each other. Two MAT leaders raised the concern that in these circumstances, the needs of the under-represented phase might be insufficiently understood and met.

94. Earlier research suggests that MATs do not just vary in practices, but do so in terms of outcomes as well. There is little evidence that schools in MATs outperform maintained schools or vice versa, although some MATs are very successful.[30, 31, 32, 33] Andrew and Pereira (2017) noted that the levels of variation in academic performance between MATs were greater than differences between MATs and local authorities (LAs).[34] The picture is further complicated by the fact that while many of the highest performing school groups at primary and secondary level are within MATs, MATs are also over-represented among the lowest performing school groups.[35]

MATs use a range of mechanisms to hold their schools to account...

95. Within a multi-level framework of schools, accountability has a number of different purposes and audiences. Accountability needs to inform:

   ■ government so that it can take action to provide universal high-quality provision

   ■ providers, in this case MATs as the legal entity responsible for quality of education

   ■ parents, so they can effectively exercise choice.

96. To inform government, accountability should sit at the funded and legally responsible level – the MAT. To inform MATs themselves, there is a need for information on both the functioning of the MAT, and of its individual schools. Parents primarily need to know about the quality of their particular local schools, because we know this varies within MATs.

97. As for any organisation, monitoring and evaluation processes in MATs are fundamental to driving improvement, identifying strategic priorities and

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[30] D Muijs, M West and M Ainscow, 'Why network? Theoretical perspectives on networking. School Effectiveness and School Improvement', 21(1), 2010, pages 5–26, www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09243450903569692.

[31] C Chapman and M Salokangas, 'Independent state-funded schools: some reflections on recent developments', in School Leadership and Management, 32:5, 2012, pages 473–486.

[32] A Finch, B Dobson, E Fischer and A Riggs, 'Academy chains unlocked', in 'Reform', 2010, www.reform.uk/research/academy-chains-unlocked.

[33] T Greany and R Higham, 'Hierarchy, markets and networks: analysing the 'self-improving school-led system' agenda in England and the implications for schools', UCL Institute of Education, 2018; www.ucl-ioe-press.com/books/education-policy/hierarchy-markets-and-networks.

[34] J Andrew and N Perera, 'The impact of academies on educational outcomes', Education Policy Institute, 2017; www.epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/impact-academies-educational-outcomes.

[35] As above.

assessing the effectiveness of their work. In this study, we have asked stakeholders for their views on how MATs review their work and how they themselves were asked for feedback and contributed views and ideas to this process.

98. In many cases, accountability is driven by data. Data was typically shared with the MAT, and schools were held accountable and challenged on it. Schools are regularly monitored, and a variety of mechanisms are used to hold individual schools to account, including performance reviews and MAT management assessing school practice, for example through (sometimes unannounced) monitoring visits.

99. It was a common perception that these measures meant that the level of accountability was greater than what schools had experienced before joining the MAT. This was seen as having an impact on the schools' performance:

> 'accountability makes a difference: we really are accountable and it makes a big impact – much better than non-academies and other MATs we've worked in.'

100. It is worth pointing out here that one of the central insights of Ofsted's new education inspection framework is that any conversation about educational effectiveness should properly include a discussion of the curriculum—the content that children and young people are learning. It is Ofsted's contention that an excessive focus on data has led, and would continue to lead, to narrowing of the curriculum and teaching to the test, and that this often disproportionately affects the most disadvantaged pupils. We would therefore question the efficacy of any accountability that is driven primarily or exclusively by data; it is likely to encourage behaviours that are not in the best interests of all children. Indeed, inspectors will not look at a school's – or a MAT's – internal progress and attainment data on inspection.

...but there is often limited accountability of the MAT itself

101. While there is therefore ample evidence that MATs hold their schools to account, the extent to which they effectively monitor their own performance is far more limited. In almost all cases, the board of trustees holds the CEO to account using an executive committee, often through a performance management process linked to implementation of strategy. In one of the MATs, we were told that the CEO is judged solely on the performance of the schools. Occasionally, boards of trustees invite or employ independent/external advisers to support this process.

102. There is less clarity on evaluation of MAT effectiveness more generally. In most cases, leaders stated that they used self-review as their main trust-level monitoring activity. However, despite representatives from the board of trustees describing their self-review as 'critical', 'reflective', and 'structured',

many did not have any formal processes for gathering the views of stakeholders. For example, we were told that this is carried out 'informally by meeting with each other', or 'as things are going quite well, there's not quite the urgency to review ourselves'. One MAT had 'no formal self-review'. One person noticed that:

> 'this may be the weakness of the current system – there is a sense they are not held to account as much as they should be'

It was unclear whether this comment was related to the particular MAT or the educational system more generally. Another participant said that the MAT they are part of is 'working on this to make it more robust'.

This thinking does not fully reflect the fact that the MAT is the single legal entity responsible for the education of all the pupils in its schools. When inspectors carry out MAT summary evaluations, therefore, we do not seek primarily to look at the MAT school-by-school, but rather we consider the overall quality of education being provided to all pupils in the care of the trust.

103. Several respondents saw MAT performance as being simply a reflection of the performance of their schools:

> 'if the schools are improving, we are successful as a board'.

The existing structures were confirmed in their value because of this. In two cases, the respondents claimed that evaluation can be based solely on reviewing the data:

> 'strong challenge based on reliable, high quality data'

and

> 'we are aware of strengths and weaknesses – we had the data!'.

104. Occasionally, MAT boards and trustees built in a procedure of schools reviewing the MAT's work or used self-review that included the views of headteachers on various elements of the MAT's work. A small number of MATs rated their performance against characteristics of successful MATs proposed by Sir David Carter, employing external consultants to carry out the evaluation. Others were involved in 'MAT-to-MAT peer review' or 'benchmarking against other MATs'.

105. Formal consultation with stakeholders, for example asking headteachers of MAT schools about how well the MAT is doing, is less developed. In many cases, headteachers' opinions were not considered or even probed at all. In a few (smaller) MATs, all headteachers were involved in all decision-making and representatives of local governing bodies met regularly with MAT leaders to share views. However, MAT leaders and school leaders were concerned that as the MAT grew, this representation may not be viable.

106. The most common ways of finding out what school leaders and staff thought were:

- principals' meetings and conferences
- regular conversations with the CEO or the headteacher's line manager
- involvement in a review of the effectiveness of the MAT and participation in working groups
- informal and ad-hoc conversations with the CEO.

107. Not all headteachers had confidence in such informal mechanisms. For example, one headteacher said that they are 'worried about being too critical'.

Governors are not always clear on the role of the local governing body

108. In describing what governing bodies in schools do and are accountable for, most participants spoke about:

- safeguarding
- monitoring the quality of teaching
- well-being and welfare of pupils and staff
- local decision-making and application of central policy
- monitoring standards and finances.

109. In some MATs, however, governors considered that their responsibilities had not changed significantly compared with when they were a maintained school. They listed:

- holding the principal to account for delivering all aspects of the improvement plan
- challenging the principal to raise standards in all aspects of the school's work
- educational outcomes.

110. The range of responses and indeed the absence of a local governing body for some schools only serves to emphasise the ambiguity around the role. Responses from MAT leaders ranged from 'accountable for everything', and 'not accountable for anything'. In the latter case, local governors became 'the level of soft influence to school and central governance', as a 'consultative body', or 'a critical friend'.

111. Governors themselves indicated:

> 'we feel accountable for everything like an ordinary governing body would be, but the actual legal responsibility sits with the central board'

and

> 'as we were before, but now to the MAT rather than LA and diocese. I see no difference in the way I act as a governor as to prior joining the MAT'.

112. There therefore appears to be some confusion around the exact role of local governing bodies in MATs.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the DfE

- The fact that accountability has multiple audiences and purposes needs to be reflected in the inspection framework for MATs and schools. This suggests the need for a model in which **both** MATS and individual schools are inspected by Ofsted. Much progress can be made under current arrangements, but ultimately the legislation that underlies school inspection will need to be amended to make this fully possible.

- While accountability at the school level is strong, accountability at MAT level needs to be strengthened, not least in the light of weak implementation of internal accountability at trust level in many MATs. Inspection arrangements should reflect this.

Recommendations for MATs

- MATs should make full use of the opportunities for standardisation of back-office functions provided by the MAT. They should explore which policies can be most helpfully developed and standardised at MAT level. Developing subject curriculums, which may be beyond the capacity of individual schools, could be one example where more trust-level activity than is currently the norm may be beneficial.

- MATs need to ensure that collaboration within the trust is used effectively and judiciously to maximise the benefits of shared expertise and mutual learning, while minimising unproductive networking for its own sake.

- MATs should work productively with the LA and other schools in their local area. They should participate in local coordinating mechanisms around statutory duties such as safeguarding and work with the LA and other schools/MATs to ensure that pupils with SEND and those subject to exclusion receive appropriate provision.

- MATs need to review their accountability carefully to ensure that it encourages educationally-focused conversations about what children are learning and that an excessive focus on data does not exist, because if it does it is likely to create perverse incentives on schools to maximise scores, narrowing the curriculum and teaching to the test, rather than delivering the best possible outcomes for children and young people

- MATs need to carefully manage growth. If a MAT is too small, it can be hard for it to maximise the advantages of MAT status through economies of scale and central support and challenge, for example. However, overly rapid growth can move MATs beyond the confines of their capacity for support.

- MATs need to have the role of the local governing body clearly set out and explained. In particular, members of local governing bodies need to know what has been delegated to that body, and what is expected of them to fulfil that role.

- As well as mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of their individual schools, MATs should put in place mechanisms to monitor their own performance at trust level.

What Ofsted are doing

- Our findings show that MATs differ significantly in how they work with their schools (some, for example, substantively centralise curriculum development, while others leave this to individual schools). Inspectors need to understand the role of the MAT in the school they are inspecting if it is part of a MAT. As part of the pre-inspection conversation with the headteacher/principal, inspectors should inform themselves about the distribution of responsibilities and functions within the MAT, including between individual schools and the trust. We have been training inspectors to ask incisive questions about governance and oversight, particularly on understanding the role of local governing bodies and establishing which functions have been delegated to them by trustees, as this varies from MAT to MAT, and is often an area in which schools are less clear

- Understanding the structure of the MAT a school is part of is important to understanding the context of the school. If the MAT routinely exerts significant influence on the school, the importance of the conversations with trustees is increased.

- Inspector training should include a thorough grounding in the legal and practical role of MATs and develop an understanding of the diversity of practice in the sector. Training for all school inspectors has recently been revised to include this information, and this will be an increasingly important part of training going forward.

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