CEP Briefing - A Note on Academy School Policy

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Summary

- The Academies programme set up under the Labour government, beginning in 2002, has so far given Academy status to 203 English secondary schools. These schools were more significantly disadvantaged in terms of pre-Academy GCSE attainment, free school meal, special educational needs and ethnic minority status.

- The new coalition government has written to all headteachers asking if they are interested in Academy status, to which 1560 schools have responded positively. Schools that have expressed an interest, contrary to the current Academies, are characterised by having a more advantaged pupil population (lower free school meal, special educational needs and ethnic minority status) and superior GCSE attainment.

- If it follows the expression of interest route to awarding Academy status to schools, the new coalition government's policy on Academy Schools is not, like the previous government's policy, targeted on schools with more disadvantaged pupils. The serious worry that follows is that this will exacerbate already existing educational inequalities.

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1. The Academies programme[3] was first introduced by the Labour government in September 2002, with the stated aim of improving the educational outcomes of some of the most disadvantaged pupils in English secondary schools. The crucial defining feature of Academies is that they are 'outside the control of local authorities' (Curtis 2008, p.15), and are typically set up in some of the most disadvantaged areas of England. Since 2002, there has been a gradual increase in the number of Academy Schools in operation. By May 2010, there were 203 English secondary schools up and running as Academies (Table 1 below shows the years in which these Academies opened).

Table 1: Academy School Openings, 2002-10

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Sum
Freq.	3	9	5	10	19	37	47	70	3	**203**

2. The new coalition government wishes to expand and further develop the Academies programme. Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, has written to every headteacher in England, and has invited them to express an interest in becoming an Academy School. A total of 1560 schools have now expressed an interest. The coalition government has stated that schools rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted will be fast-tracked through the process, and can potentially open as Academy Schools from as early as September 2010. The following Table breaks down the 1560 schools that have expressed an interest to become Academies into their school type and their rating by Ofsted.

[3] Academies are independent, non-selective, state-funded schools which are managed by a private team of independent co-sponsors (Academies and Independent Schools: Prospectus). Their annual revenue funding comes entirely from the government at a level comparable to other [local] schools, and no fees are paid by parents. Each academy has a private sector sponsor that could be from a range of areas (e.g. business, faith groups and individuals). In the early versions of the Academy Schools there was more emphasis on the sponsor making a charitable donation to help with any building costs for the new Academy School. Specifically, this meant that the sponsor had to make a donation of up to £2 million. However, this requirement was dropped by the New Labour Government in 2009 in order to encourage more sponsors to get involved with the Academies programme. The sponsors then delegate the management of the school to a largely self-appointed board of governors (an Academy usually has around 13 governors, with 7 typically appointed by the sponsor). It is the responsibility of the governing body of the Academy to employ all academy staff, agree levels of pay, agree on conditions of service with its employees, and decide on the policies for staffing structure, career development, discipline, and performance management (source: http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/what_are_academies/organisation/?version=1). It is this autonomy of the governing body to make schooling decisions which really makes Academy Schools unique (Machin and Wilson, 2009).

Table 2: Breakdown of Interested Schools, By School Type and Ofsted Classification

School Type	Number Interested	% of total schools in England (of this type) expressing an interest	Number Outstanding	Number Not Outstanding
Maintained Secondary	707	22.61%	350	357
Other	853	4.16%	475	378

Notes: 'Other' comprises middle schools, primary schools, special schools and independent schools.

3. There has been much debate as to whether the existing Academies programme has been a success. It is expensive and, to date, there have only been a limited number of studies looking at the impact of Academy Schools on educational standards. The most notable are a five year evaluation conducted by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC), and a study by Machin and Wilson (2009). PwC carry out quantitative analysis of pupil performance, by comparing improvement in final school year exams (the General Certificate of Education, or GCSE) in Academies, with the national average and with a selected group of schools. They find that improvements in pupil achievement of Academy Schools have generally exceeded corresponding improvements, both at the national level and when compared with other, similar schools.

   However, Machin and Wilson criticise the PwC report. They argue that, because the schools that become Academies were typically the worst performing schools in their respective Local Education Authorities (LEAs), a comparison between Academies and the national average is not a good one due to the issue of mean reversion (schools at the bottom of the stack are likely to bounce back towards the mean level of attainment, regardless of whether or not they are Academies). Machin and Wilson therefore evaluate the Academies performance relative to comparable schools that are also likely to experience mean reversion. Once they take account of this and pre-policy developments in GCSE scores, they find little evidence of general positive effects of Academy status on academic achievement (results from the study are replicated below in Table 3, and the only place where there is a suggestion of improved GCSE performance is the cohort opening in 2004). However, it is of considerable interest that GCSE performance has not worsened relative to comparison schools.

Table 3: School-Level Difference-in-Difference Estimates of Academy School Status on GCSE Performance, 1995/6 – 2005/6

Percent Difference in GCSE Scores For Academies in Comparison with Matched Similar Schools				
	Academies opening in September 2002	Academies opening in September 2003	Academies opening in September 2004	Academies opening in September 2005
Becomes Academy	1.57	0.01	8.95	-0.15

Notes: Taken from Machin and Wilson (2009).

4. As stated earlier, existing Academies were usually set up in areas of economic and social disadvantage (the early Academies typically being the worst performing school in acutely disadvantaged Local Authorities). They may therefore have very different characteristics to the schools that have recently expressed an interest in becoming Academies. A summary of the average characteristics of the existing Academies is presented below in Table 4. The percentages of pupils with special educational needs, entitled to free school meals, and from ethnic minority backgrounds are much higher in current academy schools than in all the maintained secondary schools. Their 2008 GCSE performance is worse than other schools (and pre-Academy performance significantly lower - see Machin and Wilson, 2009, for evidence on this).

Table 4: Average 2008 School-level Characteristics of Current Academies Compared to Other Secondary Maintained Schools

	Percentage of pupils eligible for free-school-meals	Percentage of pupils with Special Educational Needs, with statement	Percentage of pupils with Special Educational Needs, without statement	Percentage of pupils who are ethnic non-white	Average School Size (number of pupils)	Pupil-teacher Ratio	Percentage getting 5+ A*-C (GCSE)
Current Academies	29.96	2.44	27.78	31.76	896.72	14.28	60.54
Secondary Maintained Schools	13.75	2.21	18.43	17.81	1031.11	14.87	66.05

Notes: Secondary Maintained schools includes all Secondary Maintained Schools in England (excluding current Academies)

5. As a comparison, a summary of the average characteristics of the schools that have expressed an interest in becoming Academies is presented below in Table 5. The pattern with respect to student disadvantage is reversed relative to Table 4 - schools expressing an interest in becoming Academies have significantly lower percentages of pupils entitled to free school meals, special educational need, and from ethnic minority backgrounds. They also have significantly better GCSE attainment levels.

Table 5: Average 2008 School-Level Characteristics of schools Which Have Expressed an Academy Interest Compared to Not Interested Schools

	Percentage of pupils eligible for free-school-meals	Percentage of pupils with Special Educational Needs, with statement	Percentage of pupils with Special Educational Needs, without statement	Percentage of pupils who are ethnic non-white	Average School Size (number of pupils)	Pupil-teacher Ratio	Percentage getting 5+ A*-C (GCSE
Schools which have expressed an interest	9.46	1.99	15.37	16.47	1093.06	14.86	75.26
Of which: Outstanding	8.97	1.80	14.39	17.45	1116.23	14.64	82.03
Of which: Non-outstanding	9.93	2.16	16.31	15.48	1070.21	15.08	68.59
Not Interested Schools	15.21	2.29	19.52	18.29	1007.80	14.87	62.89

Notes: 'Not Interested' Schools includes all Secondary Maintained schools that have not expressed an interest in becoming an Academy School (excluding existing Academies).

6. This note makes it clear that the schools who have expressed an interest in becoming an Academy are very different from existing Academies. Existing Academy schools have a far greater percentage of pupils who are eligible for free school meals, and a larger percentage of students with special educational needs (both with and without statements). They also contain larger percentages of pupils who are ethnically non-white, and fewer pupils. In terms of educational outcomes, it is clear from the tables that existing Academy schools have poorer performance. In conclusion, the existing Academy schools and their pupils are more disadvantaged (in a number of ways) than the schools which have recently expressed an Academy interest. If it chooses to follow the expression of interest route, the new coalition governments' policy on Academy Schools is, not like the previous government's policy, targeted at schools with more disadvantaged pupils. The serious worry that follows is that this will exacerbate already existing educational inequalities.

References

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