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Leadership in multi-academy trusts

by

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Abstract

There has been an accelerating policy shift in England towards a system led improvement process for compulsory education, based on the principle of schools having greater autonomy. This government strategy has seen the rapid and further intended growth of academies which are funded directly, with no statutory responsible for accountability to local government. This radical policy has fundamentally changed the concepts of school governance and leadership within the country, with the preferred structure for supporting individual schools becoming the creation of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). In this model groups of schools are to be joined through the establishment of a trust which oversees the management of their prescribed educational provision through a corporate structure. The nature of the national school system, with its concomitant structures of governance, leadership and management, is undergoing radical change which means that the direction and control of compulsory education is now to be enacted by these trusts within a fairly loose accountability structure from central government.

This paper reports on the early stages of research into leadership within MATs which explores the issues and challenges they face as they take on the strategic ambitions of central government in this emerging era. The data that informs the findings from this research are being gathered from participants in an open access development programmes being run by the UCL Institute of Education for leadership teams from MATs. The programmes, which commenced in November 2016, involves medium size MATs of between 5 and 15 schools and aimed not only to support the achievement of economies of scale, but also to build a shared culture and improvement model that strengthens every school. There are two groups of MATs involved in the first phase of this programme, one of which is comprised wholly of Church of England trusts. The participants in both programmes are representative, therefore, of the new paradigm of school leadership and governance that is emerging from the anticipated shift to academisation of the majority of the nation's schools.

Introduction

This paper begins by tracking the shift in central government policy in England which encourages greater independence of state maintained schools as a means of effecting improvement in student learning outcomes. The process of school self-improvement envisaged by this policy currently places an emphasis on the rapid development of academies, defined as publicly funded independent schools, which will be strengthened by the formal federation of individual schools into multi-academy trusts (MATs). Each academy, and thereby MATs, are established as companies limited by guarantees with a board of directors that acts a trust. These trusts are given exempt charity status, are regulated by the Department for Education, and the schools are overseen by the National School Commission which has a number of regional commissioners who are advised (and challenged) by a Headteacher Board (HTB).

A MAT is formally led by one of the individual academies, typically the largest or most successful, and will run a central trust function which includes the employment of a chief executive officer (CEO), a finance officer and will incur other central costs which are shared across the trust. CEOs are normally directors of the trust which has the Board of Directors (trustees) at the top of the organisational structure. The research undertaken for this paper investigates how organisational structures are being manifested in medium size MATs, those with between five and 15 schools, the relationships between the key members and the way in which CEOs and Chairs of trusts perceive and enact their leadership roles. The study is confined to schools in England as those in the other countries that form the UK operate under separate regulations. In this first phase of the research participants come from a range of MATs which includes those that are aligned to the Church of England, a relationship which carries with it expectations and a degree of control over the ethos of each academy within Church of England MATs. This study seeks, therefore, to explore how senior leaders, and particularly CEOs, within MATS perceive and enact their leadership roles within an emerging framework of alternative school governance. The sample is deemed to be reasonably representative of new systems of governance, therefore, and allows for the construction of an overview of school leadership in England during this time of change,

Towards the academisation of England's schools

Towards the end of the previous century the Labour government, elected in 1997, determined to effect improvement in the performance of schools in England, which they deemed to be less than satisfactory in relation to student outcomes in other similar nations. Their first attempt to improve schools, particularly those in deprived areas was to designate Education Action Zones (EAZ) in 1998 which almost mirrored the work of previous Labour administrations of the 1960s which had designated schools in deprived areas as "Educational Priority Areas" and promised to give them extra money for school-building projects. Action zones were cover clusters of around 20 schools, usually 2 or 3 secondary schools and the rest primary and nursery schools. Each zone will be run by an action forum, made up of the local partners in the scheme, including the local education authority, local and national businesses, school governors, parents and other local and community groups.

It was notable that in each forum there will be a lead partner for which the government wanted at least one forum to be led by a business partner. The involvement of business in running the nation's schools became a central feature of subsequent policy by this and successive Labour governments during the early part of the current century. Seemingly obsessed by a wish to emulate the economic performance of other countries, the government placed faith in the simplistic premise that better performance by school students on standard assessment tasks would lead to enhanced economic performance for the nation. Schools in deprived areas, where there was frequently evidence of chronic under achievement, were targeted for improvement and to be provided with additional resources designed to enhance opportunity. Most importantly, it seems, educationalists were to take advice and guidance from business partners who, it was claimed, had a better understanding of how to prepare students for the world of work.

By 2000, however, it was clear that business partners were not engaging in the way envisaged by government with research showing many zones received little or no additional funds from private sources. The EAZ scheme was not renewed and a different attempt was made to enact this policy desire with the introduction of the Fresh Start scheme in which the weakest schools were closed and then re-opened under new management. This was not a success either, however, and in May 2000 Education Secretary David Blunkett said the Government had decided "a more radical approach" was needed and "substantial resources" would now be provided for the establishment of city academies (politics.co.uk, n.d.)

This new strategy was to build upon the previous Conservative government initiative of City Technology Colleges (CTC), the opening of City Academies. The CTC programme had been established in the late 1980s with the intention of establishing state maintained schools which were independent of local governments. For most of the twentieth century maintained schools had been under the control of elected local authorities which often had limited accountability to national policies. One of the intentions of the Conservative government during that period of office was the marketization of the public sector, an approach that was based on making providers responsive to demand. The Education Reform Act of 1988 was designed in many

ways to transfer the power of decision making to schools and away from local authorities. The notion to set up CTCs had been driven by that principle and it was to this approach that the Labour government in the search to improve student outcomes in areas of chronic underperformance on standard assessment tasks. City Academies were created by the Learning and Skills Act of 2002, to be sponsored by business partners, with CTCs to be encouraged to convert into academies. Three such academies were opened by 2002.

The Education Act 2002 allowed 'city' to be removed so that schools in non-city areas could join the programme and by 2006 there were 46 new academies, including some previous CTCs which had converted. In 2004 the government coined the descriptor of Sponsored Academies, which was backdated to 2002 to allow all such schools to be described as 'Academy'. The concept was underwritten by regulations which expected each academy to become a trust that was set up by a sponsor which entered a legally binding contract agreement with the Secretary of State, the Funding Agreement, which governed the way in which the academy operated.

At that time sponsors, which either could be private individuals/companies or organisations, were required to contribute 10 per cent of the academy's capital costs (up to a maximum of £2m), with the remainder of the capital and running costs to be met by the state. As had been the case with Action Zones, however, potential business partners were not so keen as government to commit financially to the nascent process of academisation which, coupled with high building costs, led to government spending £1.3bn by 2006 with an average cost of £25m to set up each new academy. The requirement for sponsorship was relaxed soon afterwards, ostensibly to allow for more organisations to commit to supporting schools without financial commitment, but was a move that was accompanied by less capital spending than had been evident until then.

The planned growth of academies through the rest of the Labour government never quite matched aspirations with just 207 established by the general election of 2010 which saw a new Coalition government. Under the determined direction of the new Secretary of State, Michael Gove, there was a much more aggressive drive towards academisation. There was less emphasis on business involvement by this time and

a greater focus on releasing schools from local authority control, towards a new system of school self-improvement which was deemed by Lord Adonis, the original architect of the academy programme, as the best way to "breach the educational Berlin Wall between private and state education." Conversion was now to be open to all schools and by January, 2011 there were already 407 academies, with a further 254 applications in place. The Academies Act 2010 allowed for the Secretary of State to require the academisation of any school that was deemed to be underperforming, for which subsequently there were schools which were forced to become academies often against the will of governors, parents and teachers (Elton and Male, 2015). By September 2011 there 1300 academies and c7000 by December, 2016 (Department for Education, 2016).

The rise of multi-academy trusts

The concentration of academies within the English state school system is still technically low at 30 per cent overall, but with the majority of secondary schools (68 per cent) and a rising proportion of primary schools (21 per cent) now being independent state maintained schools there has been a devastating effect on local authority funding which makes it virtually impossible for them to provide adequate support for the remaining secondary and primary schools still officially under their control. The locus of control within the school system has thus shifted in this power void and has two potential suitors who appear to be best placed to adapt to this scenario. The first power source is already a significant entity on the national scene, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted); the second is multi-academy trusts. This paper is not the place to explore the way in which Ofsted could adapt to the current situation, however, despite that being a tempting line of enquiry. Instead it will explore what has happened in regard to the evolution of multi-academy trusts before exploring the ways in which senior leaders within these federations are perceiving and enacting their leadership roles.

Multi-academy trusts are, as indicated above, a federation of academies from which it is anticipated not only will there be economies of scale, but for which there will be mutual beneficial outcomes in terms of student engagement and success. MATs are generally led by a single academy which will take legal responsibility and accountability for the entire group, as well as ensuring the infrastructure is present to

allow for multi-site collaborative and coordinated activity. The trust may be aligned to particular philosophy or business plan according to the motive of the main sponsor, but will inevitably conform to the pattern of any multi-site organisation. In other words, MATs will have a Board of Directors, a core purpose and central trust facilities and services which will oversee operational activity and decision making.

As of July, 2015 there were 846 multi-academy trusts in England, ranging from single academy MATs which had been established for future expansion to very large MATs that were well established (Hill, 2015). Figure 1 shows the size of the various MATs in England which demonstrates that the data show the vast majority, at that time, were between two and five schools and supported the argument that the Department for Education strategy was to invest in smaller, rather than very large academy chains.

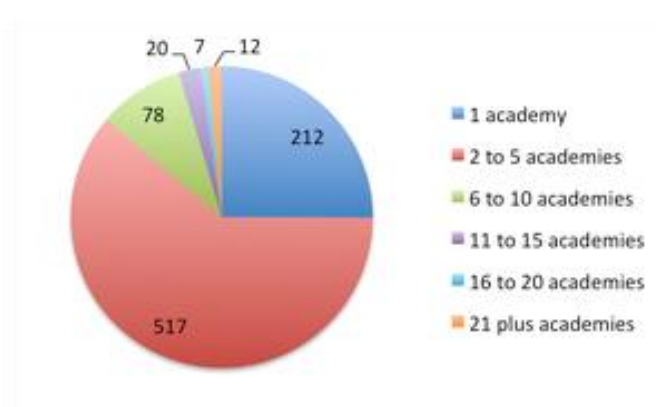


Figure 1: Number of multi-academy trusts by number of academies in the trust (Hill, 2015)

There were only 12 MATs which had more than 20 academies by this time, of which the largest had 61. The majority of 'fledgling' MATs of 2011 had by now grown to have between six and 20 academies, with most of the 105 MATs in this category falling under one of three headings (Hill, 2015):

- Long-established MATs that have chosen to grow at a slower more sustainable, rate;
- Newer academy groups which in some instances have grown quite quickly as groups of schools have converted together and in other cases the relatively rapid growth reflects the entrepreneurial nature of the MAT Board or CEO; and
- Diocesan Trusts which probably represents the largest and fastest growth in the MAT sector.

A typology of MATs?

The pattern of development for MATs indicated above suggests that there is a correlation between their growth and the Innovation Adoption Curve that has now been in our theoretical lens for over half a century (Rogers, 1962). In that construct all innovations follow an adoption model which divides into innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards. This, in turn, led me to consider identifying a typology of MATs with classification as: Showcase, Entrepreneurial, Expansionist, Safety Net and Stragglers. As can be seen from Table 1, this led to the correspondence of these categories to Rogers Innovation Adoption Curve.

Type of academy	Rogers Adoption Curve
Showcase	Innovators (2.5%)
Entrepreneurs	Early adopters (13.5%)
Expansionist	Early majority (34%)
Safety Net	Late majority (34%)
Stragglers	Laggards (16%)

Table 1: Type of academy in relation to Rogers Adoption Curve (Author, 2017)

The conclusion being drawn from such a classification is that a feature of the 15 CTCs that opened between 1988 and 1993, 12 of which later converted to academies between 2003 and 2008, were funded generously in terms of both capital and recurrent expenditure and were treated as *showcases* for independent state schools. Much the same could be said of early sponsor academies as well, with the average cost of opening the first 46 new academies (as opposed to converting CTCs) being £25m, as indicated earlier. By the time of the general election of 2010 there were 203 academies opened, but without the high costs associated with the small number of innovating institutions. It is possible to classify these academies, many of which were quick to form chains and to provide the precedent for MATs, as *entrepreneurial*. Those that engaged in the rapid growth following the formation of the Coalition government in 2010 could be seen as ‘early adopters’, forming the early majority, which are

classified here as *expansionist*. As will be argued later in this paper the Church of England MATs could be deemed to be expansionist in nature in the quest to ensure Christian values are central to the ethos of state maintained schools. This is a different objective for MATs than one driven by entrepreneurial motives. In England we appear now to be entering the late majority stage of the Adoption Curve, however, with the Department for Education seeking to ensure sufficient support exists across the state system for students in pockets of chronic underperformance by actively encouraging MATs to include schools in their trust who had previously resisted or chosen not to become an academy. This stage is classified in this paper as the *safety net* and is premised on the (frequently challenged) assumption that school improvement is accelerated through conversion to academy status. There are recent and current examples during this stage of schools being forced into academy status, a feature of government allowed by an amendment to the Academies Act of 2010, as well as being cajoled, persuaded or incited to convert to academy status. If and when such a stage is reached where the vast majority of schools are academies within MATs there is string likelihood that a small portion of schools in England would be outside of the new system and classified as *stragglers*.

In this typology it is suggested that medium MATs evolve according to the motivation of trust members and, in particular CEOs and boards of directors. At this stage this is no more than a hypothesis which will, in due course, be investigated as part of this enquiry into leadership in MATs. For now, however, the discussion in this paper has to be confined to the way in which senior leaders in MATs perceive and enact their leadership roles.

Methodology

The UCL Institute of Education has been running team leadership development programmes for medium size multi-academy trusts in England through the London Centre for Leadership in Learning from November, 2016. The 9-month integrated programme combines three residential modules which are supplemented by facilitated regional learning sets, a range of practical tasks and assignments and the opportunity for participants to engage in online and self-directed learning through use of a dedicated VLE site. The intention of this research reported in this paper was to gather

data from participants in order to reveal the emerging issues pertaining to system leadership within academy trusts.

A total of 34 willing participants has been identified for the research, each of whom has signed a letter of informed consent which indicates their agreement to engage with this enquiry. The open access programme is for senior teams within the 21 participating MATs and includes Chairs of Trusts and Chief Operating Officers in the overall programme. Six Chairs of Trusts have agreed to participate in the accompanying research, along with 14 CEOs. The programme for the Church of England is only for the chief executives of the 25 participating MATs, however, from which 14 have agreed to participate in this investigation. A feature of the Church of England MATs, as will be described more fully in due course, is that many in the leading executive role have yet to change their title from Headteacher or Executive Headteacher which describes their former position more closely than the reality of working in a MAT. This is indicative of the speed of change evident within the state school system which, again, will be discussed more fully in due course.

Pre-course telephone interviews were conducted with the CEOs from 21 trusts who were to participate in the open access programme and with 17 executive leaders from the programme that was to run for Church of England MATs. That data was largely demographic in nature and included information about the nature of the MAT. This was supplemented by a two semi-structured interviews held with individual CEOs, one from each group, that were designed to identify and clarify the areas to be investigated as the research progresses to other CEOs who are to be interviewed.

The outcomes reported here, therefore, refer only to those participants who are the leading executive role within the MATs participating in the two programmes

Findings

Job title: The title of the leading executive figure within the Church of England varied with 11 describing themselves as Chief Executive Officer, six as Executive Headteachers, four as merely Headteacher/Principal, one as a Principal Officer and one as Chief Education Officer. An unusual feature of this group was the combination of the role of Chief Executive Officer with the responsibility to be the Diocesan Director

of Education, with two participants qualifying for this joint role. Conversely all the leading executives in the open access programme described themselves as Chief Executive Officers.

Establishing the MAT: The key themes emerging from the pre-course interviews with the Church of England MATs were:

- a desire, usually from the Diocese, to ensure that academies were exhibiting Christian values;
- the identification of the leading executive officer, whatever their title was, was most commonly through persuasion than application;
- the infrastructure of the MAT was embryonic at best.

Similar themes emerged from the two individual semi-structured interviews, with the CEO of a rapidly growing trust in the East Midlands of England (for whom the pseudonym of Roberta has been adopted) describing how she initially tried to resist becoming a CEO and wished to remain as an Executive Headteacher of a federation of three primary schools. Events overtook that personal desire, however, and in the short time between the establishment of the licence holding academy in 2013 and the time of the interview with her in January, 2017 the emerging MAT had eight schools and an expectation that this would grow to a total of 14 in the next year. The other individual interview (for whom the pseudonym of Jackie has been adopted) was also drafted in to the role and, at the time of the interview with her in early February, was still in an acting CEO capacity. Jackie's personal experience had been similar to Roberta in that she had been a successful interventionist, either as a school improvement officer or executive headteacher, to a small number of primary schools, but had been persuaded to step into the CEO role in a rapidly growing MAT which in this case had been driven by the diocese. In both these cases the growth of the MAT could be perceived as a defensive move, in Roberta's case by the local authority and in Jackie's by the diocese.

Roberta described the MAT as being akin to "a train hurtling down the tracks for which we are laying the lines just before we arrive". The initial intention in her case was to build upon the success of the licence holding school as a standalone academy to

become leader of a Teaching School Alliance¹ which, once established, quickly grew to incorporate some 53 schools. Two similar local schools expressed a wish to join the federation, but it was not long before local authorities in the region sought help from the emerging MAT to also take on schools that were struggling. The Department for Education also played a role having ordered two struggling schools to become academies, for which pressure was induced for them to join the MAT. In Jackie's case the birth of the MAT four years ago was in response to a need to protect a school as it became a sponsored academy. The MAT has now grown to a total of eight schools, each of which had been allowed to retain its individual status. In this example the MAT for which Jackie is acting CEO is demonstrating similar tendencies to establishing infrastructure as Roberta's, although in this case the apparent unwillingness to address the power relationships within the MAT produces what may prove to be an impossible challenge. In both cases it is concluded that the desire to create a MAT was responsive rather than proactive. This notion of defensiveness also could be detected in the pre-course interviews in which several participants had indicated that the growth of the MAT was driven more by pragmatic need than strategic intent.

Central to this approach to the emergence and rapid growth of Church of England MATs had been the diocese, which is a district under the pastoral care of a bishop in the Christian Church. The Church of England was pioneer in establishing schools, particularly for children of the poor, and after many innovations around the beginning of the nineteenth century the National Society for Promoting Religious Education was established in 1811 with the aim establish a church school in every parish. In many ways their subsequent success was such that the passing of the 1944 Education Act in England, which provides the structure for state education, could not have been achieved without the cooperation of the Church. The central Church of England Education Office supports education in church and community settings, schools, further education colleges and higher education institutions, but each diocese runs a Diocesan Board of Education supporting Church schools. With 250 sponsored and over 650 converter academies, the Church is the biggest sponsor of academies in

¹ Teaching schools work with others to provide high-quality training, development and support to new and experienced school staff. Teaching school alliances are led by a teaching school and include schools that are benefiting from support, as well as strategic partners who lead some aspects of training and development. This is a nationally conferred status and part of the DfE system leadership strategy which carries with it the award of a grant to support associated activities.

England (Church of England, 2017). At the heart of Church of England schools is the teaching of Christianity and it is the protection of that desire which seems to have been the main motivation for establishing MATs.

In many cases the move to academy status and to these medium size MATs seems to have been defensive and to provide for self-control rather than to allow an outside agency change the designation of the school or group of schools. As has been discussed above the Secretary of State now has the power to enforce academisation and from the data accumulated so far in the early stages of this research suggests that many MATs have been established along the principle of 'let's jump before we are pushed'. The consequences seem to be that for the MATs being investigated here is that the infrastructure is often embryonic at best with the risk of instability or intractability remaining in the forthcoming period. This, I suspect, will lead to the leading executives spending more time on establishing and securing the infrastructure of the MAT at the expense of being able to lead on school improvement processes.

This is not always the case, however, with there being multiple examples of MATs across the country which do have strategic intent and have established secure services across the trust, including within the MAT for which Roberta is the CEO. Here the appointment of a Finance Officer and a central trust team has allowed her to focus on school improvement. Three associate headteachers, each with their own school within the MAT, have been appointed to act as her "legs and eyes" with across trust responsibilities and meet with her at the start of each week as part of the strategic overview. All other schools within the trust have retained both the headteacher position and the board of governors, each of which provide a contribution to the management of the MAT. Operational meetings are held every other week with all headteachers, for example, whilst the chair of each governing body is also a director on the board of trustees. Such has been the success that Roberta still feels she has a direct role in school improvement through a combination of access to hard and soft data, together with the opportunity to visit each school and spend quality time with them on a regular basis. She does exhibit concern that she may be less able to do this as the trust increases in size and the distance between her and the school in action grows wider. One expected consequence, she claims, will be a need to create a highly effective structure of distributed leadership in relation to school improvement.

Conclusion

The classification on a national scale conducted above suggests that the medium size MATs explored here appear to lean more towards the 'safety net' rather than the 'expansionist' model and are exhibiting a number of growing pains in terms of establishing leadership structures and processes that allow focus on school improvement. It is perhaps rather too early to establish that clearly and further data will need to be collected before these initial findings can be substantiated or disproved. What has emerged from the initial enquiry, and especially the individual interviews, is a set of issues from which the wider research team can establish an interview protocol to allow leadership in MATs to be explored in more depth.

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