

A response to the House of Commons Education Committee report on Multi-Academy Trusts

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The number of schools joining multi-academy trusts has grown over the last five years, and it is expected that this growth will continue. The House of Commons Education Committee has, as a result, looked into the performance and role of these trusts. [Steven J Courtney](#), [Ruth McGinity](#), [Steven Jones](#), [Robert Hindle](#), [Stephen M Rayner](#) and [Belinda Hughes](#) focus on four key aspects of the Committee's report and argue that broader questions about the government's policy remain untouched.

The House of Commons Education Committee published its [report](#) on multi-academy trusts (MATs) on 28th February. At a time when the health of [school budgets is increasingly jeopardised](#), the report is a timely reminder that the role of the select-committee system is to hold government to account. The report consequently critiques some aspects of the development and administration of multi-academy trusts, whilst largely accepting the overarching policy strategy.

Academisation since 2010 has increased rapidly, leading to [new types and configurations of academy](#). A MAT is the most common way of uniting diverse academies into one legal entity, governed by a single board of trustees. Government policy on MATs reflects an expectation that maintained schools should become academies and that these should join or form a MAT. What is in doubt, and is addressed by this report, is how this policy aim is being operationalised.

In this response to the report, we focus on four key areas: the report's attitude towards local authorities; how it addresses MATs' financial sustainability; its distinctive treatment of leadership; and the report's use of language.



The role of local authorities

One of the most striking features of the report is the marked change in the way in which local authorities are

described and positioned. After many years as a target of what Stephen Ball called ‘discourses of derision’, local authorities are now seen as the potential saviours of an incoherent programme of MATification.

Allowing local authorities to set up their own MATs, which has been impossible until now, might entice hitherto reluctant school governors and leaders, particularly in primary schools, to join a MAT, because they would expect to retain valued relationships and support structures. We support the report’s conclusion that the fundamental problem remains, however. A triangle of power-bases – Ofsted, Regional School Commissioners and local authorities – has been established, without clarity about the place of each within what the present Secretary of State calls ‘[the schools ecosystem](#)’.

Financial sustainability

The report gives a warm reception to the idea of a ‘growth check’ on MATs and we await the metrics on which such checks will be made. This acknowledges that larger MATs increasingly become monopoly providers, both regionally and nationally. Previous thinking might have suggested that larger-scale organisations benefit from cost-saving economies of scale – important in a tight financial climate – and an Austrian economics view of the power of innovation driven by greater funds. The need for ‘growth checks’ suggests a consideration of the drawbacks of monopoly positions.

Are some MAT leads driven by power rather than quality? In *The New Industrial State* (1967), JK Galbraith introduced the notion of a small number of larger corporations dominating markets, a ‘technostructure’ of self-interested managers, a system by which ‘predator’ firms govern and which serves to maintain their own power through expansion. The performance of many academy chains to date suggests that the scale of a MAT has at best an inconsistent impact on outcomes. Furthermore, the report’s warning that neither the Department for Education nor the Education Funding Agency may cope with future MAT growth should ring alarm bells.

Leadership

‘Strong leadership’ is the fifth of the six characteristics identified by the Committee as key to MAT success. It is not called leadership, however, but ‘a shared vision’, supporting [findings](#) that the former is increasingly reducible to the latter. ‘Leaders’ in this report mean MAT CEOs and the overarching Board of Trustees, which includes sponsor representation.

In fact, there are many more references here to ‘sponsor’ than ‘leader’. This has the effect of diffusing the act of leadership, of partly removing its exercise from a single, perhaps heroic figure in the New Labour mould. If trusts may ‘do leadership’, two questions immediately follow. First, which activities apparently constituting leadership are possible or impossible? Second, how is accountability for the impact of such activities understood and experienced?

The importance of language

Finally, it is worth noting the subtle shifts in language that pervade the report. As well as the now-familiar market-based metaphors (“sponsored” school, “brokered” deals, etc.), we also find new imagery. For example, some MAT-less schools are framed as “untouchables”, presumably because they are deemed financially unviable rather than because they belong to a caste system that regards them as impure. The term seems to follow similar rhetoric used by Warwick Mansell and others when characterising such schools as “[orphans](#)”. This image may capture a sense of rejection, but the danger is that in framing schools as in need of benevolent parenting we disguise the truth – that they’ve been forsaken not by misfortune but by an ideology.

In conclusion, this report ostensibly leaves untouched the broader questions concerning the appropriateness of the overarching MAT policy: who the winners and losers are from their very existence, for example, and what this means for public education. However, the extent and radical nature (for these times) of some of its proposals amount to a damning indictment of the direction of travel. For instance, it is highly unorthodox to call for the sort of role for local authorities that it has; to call into question MATs’ financial sustainability and to downplay (relatively) individual

leadership. In that spirit, it is seeking to obtain maximum value, effectiveness, and usefulness from a policy constructed as unopposable.

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