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## Where Next for the School Academisation Experiment?

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*We are mid-way through a fundamental restructure of the English school system but, as yet, the evidence that the reforms have led to either improvement or greater efficiency is limited. Dr Thomas Perry considers the best way forward for the academies policy.*

### The School Academisation Experiment

In 2010 less than 300 English schools were academy schools, ‘free’ of local authority (LA) control. By the middle of 2019, the figure was nearly 8000. Initially most academies were stand-alone single academy trust (SAT) schools. Many have now joined one of over 1000 school groups called multi academy trusts (MATs). MATs come in all shapes and sizes: from a small handful with over 50 schools, to around 500 MATs linking 3 or fewer schools.

With the movement from LA-Maintained schools (LAMs), to SATs, then to MATs, we have taken the system apart and are in the process of putting it back together again. The growth of school groups, while slowing, is expected to continue for the foreseeable future, despite little central policy direction. The status of schools is currently largely being left to local determination. The policy is now at risk of losing momentum, leaving a fragmented, complex and confusing system

### Half-time Results - Value for Money?

A picture is beginning to emerge about whether academisation is improving effectiveness and efficiency of the system, as intended. Research has found that academies are not consistently outperforming other schools: there are as many high and low performing LAs as MATs. To boot, performance comparisons are made more difficult by official measures, which are knowingly and by design disadvantageous to schools with a disproportionate number of pupils whose characteristics are associated with lower performance.

When it comes to efficiency, the emerging results are disappointing. We were told that single autonomous schools will be more efficient than local bureaucracies in making resources choices; that multi-academy trusts will secure cost advantages through economies of scale. Our recent studies into the spending patterns of SAT, MAT and LA-maintained schools found that academy schools spent more than local authority schools on administration and management; considerably less on educational support for disadvantaged pupils; and – contrary to expectations – SATs did not gain any ‘economies of scale’ by joining together in MATs. While these early results are not encouraging, it remains to be seen the extent to which these many additional costs are adjustment costs as MATs have grown and new organisational arrangements have embedded.



## Beyond Academies

Academies are spending more on leadership (e.g. for MAT-wide leadership posts), but it is difficult at present to know whether this is money well spent. My colleagues and I from the UoB *Education Leadership Academy* know first-hand from working with senior educational leaders on our Educational Leadership programmes, now including our degree apprenticeship programme, that academies are indeed offering exciting possibilities for collaboration and many are adopting innovative, powerful models of professional learning.

But then again, so are local authority-maintained schools. I see no difference in the ability and commitment of academy and non-academy leaders on our programmes to ensure that children and young people flourish. School leaders across the sector all face common challenges around curriculum development, attracting and retaining teachers, workload, and managing currently tight budgets.

The way forward, in my view, is to shift the debate past pitting one school type against another. While there are certainly appreciable differences between SATs, MATs and LAMs – and this is an important area for study and leadership – a more constructive debate would be to decide which powers schools trusts, and local authorities should and could hold. For example, should schools decide their own admissions arrangements? Their curriculum? The length of school day and term dates? Teacher pay and conditions? How and on what school improvement money is spent?

The reforms to the English system have been a large-scale ‘natural experiment’ for school governance, education policy, school improvement and leadership, one that is set to continue for the foreseeable future. We should learn the lessons that this experiment is offering and seek to move towards a more stable and coherent system on the basis of what we find.



- [More about Dr Thomas Perry at the University of Birmingham](#)
- [Find out more about the Education Leadership Academy](#)

### **Recent and Related Publications**

Davies, P., Diamond, C., & Perry, T. (2019). Implications of autonomy and networks for costs and inclusion: Comparing patterns of school spending under different governance systems. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 1741143219888738.

Perry, T. (2016). English Value-Added Measures: Examining the Limitations of School Performance Measurement. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42(6), 1056-1080.  
<https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/berj.3247>

Perry, T., Davies, P., & Brady, J. (2020). Using video clubs to develop teachers’ thinking and practice in oral feedback and dialogic teaching. *Cambridge Journal of Education*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2020.1752619>