

Academies & MATs: Academy status: an introduction :

Multi-academy trusts (MATs): pros and cons

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It's for your school to decide whether a multi-academy trust (MAT) model would work for you. Find out about some of the perceived advantages and disadvantages of joining or forming a MAT to help inform your decision making.

In-depth
article

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About this article

This article summarises opinions from various sources about academy status. It also presents findings from interviews with school leaders and one of our associate education experts. The views expressed are those of each organisation or individual.

This article also does not aim to replace a school's own analysis of the pros and cons of joining or forming a MAT. These will depend on each school's particular circumstances.

Possible advantages

Financial efficiencies

An article published in Academy Magazine looks at the possible financial stability afforded to MATs, and sets out some possible advantages in relation to financial efficiencies.

The article is available via the UK200Group website, a professional association of chartered accountancy and law firms.

[MATs: can they offer greater financial stability?, UK200Group](#)

<http://www.uk200group.co.uk/news-and-blog/PublishedArticles/News-7894.aspx>

According to MATs questioned by the Department for Education (DfE):

- Being in a MAT increases the scope for having centralised functions and collective procurement, particularly as scale increases, which helps reduce costs
- There is scope to generate additional income from commercial activities across the MAT
- Having centralised financial systems enables the trust to have effective oversight and control of finances, and helps promote a "value for money culture"
- Trusts can vary the proportion of funding they retain to reflect the different circumstances of individual schools (it adds that if doing so, trusts should be transparent about what proportion they are retaining, how it is determined and what functions it enables the trust to provide)

You can find this in the DfE's good practice guidance for MATs (pages 45 to 49).

[MATs: good practice guidance and expectations for growth, GOV.UK – DfE \(Adobe pdf file\)](#)

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/576240/Multi-academy_trusts_good_practice_guidance_and_expectations_for_growth.pdf

Sharing staff

As all staff in a MAT are employed by the trust, this means that the same members of staff could work across more than one school (for example, there might be a single catering manager covering all schools in the trust).

Sharing staff in this way can bring financial benefits in terms of reduced staffing costs.

Sharing good practice

Multi-academy trusts (MATs) may:

- Facilitate the sharing of effective practice across a group of schools, so that when a particular approach has been shown to improve teaching and learning, it can be implemented across the MAT
- Make it easier for teachers to support each other across a group of schools by sharing and learning from good practice, taking on increased responsibility for specialist subjects and acting as a coach and "critical friend"

The above are among collected reasons that school leaders gave as to why the governing boards of their schools had adopted a MAT structure, which you can find in the DfE's guidance document for MATs, linked to above (pages 10 to 11).

Other non-financial benefits

Graeme Hornsby, one of our associate education experts, explained that forming or joining a MAT should not be seen as just a financial exercise. You should weigh up what potential benefits being part of the MAT will bring to your school

non-financially as well as financially, and the value the MAT will bring to the pupils across the trust (in your school and in the other schools in the MAT).

For example, he gave the following benefits that could be derived through successful collaboration in a MAT:

- Your headteacher not needing to worry about premises management issues such as blocked drains, asbestos or contractors coming onto the school site if the MAT delivers business management functions for schools across the trust. Your headteacher can instead focus on being the head of learning in your school, and have more time freed up to do so
- Joint moderation of pupils' work, which your teachers might otherwise struggle to complete, particularly if yours is a small primary school
- Joint training opportunities, where staff in particular roles at individual schools could work together across the MAT (e.g. special educational needs co-ordinators or school business managers)
- More opportunities for career progression for your staff, which might help you retain and recruit good staff

Possible disadvantages

Loss of control

A potential disadvantage for individual academies is the loss of control. This is suggested in a guide from UHY Hacker Young, a group of chartered accountants, which looks in detail at the MAT structure.

You can download the guide from the webpage linked to below:

[Are you considering becoming a multi-academy trust?, UHY Hacker Young](http://www.uhy-uk.com/sectors/academy-schools/academy-schools-blog/are-you-considering-becoming-a-multi-academy-trust/)

<http://www.uhy-uk.com/sectors/academy-schools/academy-schools-blog/are-you-considering-becoming-a-multi-academy-trust/>

What is a trustee?

Trustees sit on the board of an academy trust, which is the body accountable for the academy or for all schools within a multi-academy trust. Like the DfE, we use the term trustee when referring to this specific governance role in an academy trust. Previous versions of the model articles of association used the terms governor and director to describe this role.



What is a local governor?

Local governors sit on local governing bodies in multi-academy trusts, below the board of trustees. They are usually delegated certain functions by the board of trustees in relation to a particular academy within the group. The academy trustees retain overall accountability for the multi-academy trust.

Governance issues: recruiting the right trustees

As MAT governance can be complex, you are likely to require highly skilled trustees who may be difficult to recruit.

This is explained in section 2.2 of a report from the public sector research organisation Reform, which covers the results of a survey of academy trust chief executives. This section of the report looks at leadership and governance in MATs, considering the possible difficulties regarding governance in large MATs (see pages 24 to 28).

You can access the report from the following webpage:

[Academy chains unlocked, Reform](http://www.reform.uk/publication/academy-chains-unlocked/)

<http://www.reform.uk/publication/academy-chains-unlocked/>

Economic risks

The article from Academy Magazine on the UK200 group website, linked to above, also points out potential economic concerns and risks of MATs.

The DfE's good practice guidance, also linked to above, explains that joining a MAT may bring additional central costs, and will therefore not automatically bring economies of scale.

However, there may be new opportunities to secure efficiencies as the trust grows (page 45).

Failures of one school affect the whole MAT

If one school in a MAT fails then this could potentially have a negative effect on the MAT as a whole.

This is suggested in a factsheet on MATs, also produced by UHY Hacker Young (page 2).

You can download the factsheet from the following webpage:

[Academy schools: MATs factsheet, UHY Hacker Young](http://www.uhy-uk.com/office-resources/etchworth/sector-brochures-etchworth/academy-schools-multi-academy-trusts-factsheet-2/)

<http://www.uhy-uk.com/office-resources/etchworth/sector-brochures-etchworth/academy-schools-multi-academy-trusts-factsheet-2/>

Due diligence and questions to consider

Read our other articles on:

- [Carrying out due diligence on a MAT you're considering joining](#)
- [Questions to consider when forming a new MAT](#)
- [Questions to ask before joining a MAT](#)

Research into the MAT model

Impact on the performance of disadvantaged pupils

A research report from the Sutton Trust in June 2017 looks at the impact of academy chains on low-income pupils.

Pages 4 to 5 of the report set out some of the key findings.

You can download the report from the webpage linked to below:

[Chain effects 2017, Sutton Trust](https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/chain-effects-2017-academies/)

<https://www.suttontrust.com/research-paper/chain-effects-2017-academies/>

The growth of academy chains

In 2012, the National College for School Leadership (a former executive agency of the DfE) published a report on the growth of academy chains. This includes a section on the advantages and risks of expanding academy chains to include more schools.

Listed advantages include:

- A broader base for developing leaders
- New opportunities to build new primary/secondary curriculum and transition models
- A stronger brand to attract parents and applications for admission

Listed risks include:

- Insufficient leadership capacity to manage the challenge of too many schools taken on at once
- More bureaucracy when new schools are added to the chain
- The core infrastructure becomes overstretched

Chapter 13 of the report looks at challenges for sponsored and converter academy chains.

You can download the report from the following webpage:

[The growth of academy chains: implications for leaders and leadership, GOV.UK – National College for Teaching and Leadership](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-growth-of-academy-chains-implications-for-leaders-and-leadership)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-growth-of-academy-chains-implications-for-leaders-and-leadership>

MATs containing primary and secondary schools

Supporting transition

Where a MAT is formed of feeder primary and secondary schools, it can aid transition and ensure a consistent educational experience.

This is a result of:

- Shared accountability
- A reduction in bureaucratic barriers
- A shared ethos and understanding of the schools' expertise and culture

This is explained in the DfE's good practice guidance for MATs, linked to in section 1 (see page 8).

Breaking down the KS2 to KS3 barrier

We contacted one of our associate education experts, Gareth Balch, to ask about the pros and cons associated with MATs containing primary and secondary academies. He said:

A MAT containing primary and secondary schools may be able to break down the Key Stage (KS) 2 to KS3 barrier, and create opportunities for innovation and learning across both Key Stages.

However, this kind of grouping will be more vulnerable if it is controversial locally.

Rationale needed

The DfE will want to see the rationale for forming an MAT that contains a primary and a secondary school. The DfE is likely to accept the MAT application if, for example, the primary is not performing well and the aim of the MAT is to drive up standards.

Sources

Graeme Hornsby is an education consultant with significant experience of school business management at a senior level. He has particular expertise in strategic financial planning, human resources and governance.

Gareth Balch is a school improvement consultant with a background in secondary school leadership. He works in interim leadership roles and runs mock inspections and INSET trainings on a range of topics.

Next steps

- [Forming a new MAT: questions to consider](#)
- [Joining a MAT: questions to ask](#)
- [Due diligence: schools joining an existing MAT](#)
- [Multi-academy trust \(MAT\): what to consider before conversion](#)
- [MATs: describing the principles of collaboration](#)
- [Characteristics of successful MATs](#)
- [Central services provided by MATs](#)

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