

Governance in multi-academy trusts (MATs) in England

- evidence from the field

Dr Trevor Male

London Centre for Leadership in Learning
UCL Institute of Education

School governance in England

- Until 2010 virtually all state-maintained schools had their own governing body which was the legal decision making forum for the organisation;
- 207 academy trusts existed at that time which were charitable companies limited by guarantees.

Purposes of governance

- “School governing bodies are part of the complex system of checks and balances inherent in the administration of public services that reflect the ability of English society to prevent fraud and misuse of resources.” (Male, 2006: 99);
- normally bodies had between nine and 19 members, according to pupil numbers, and included representatives of the local authority (nominees and officers) together with elected parents and teachers.

Concepts of governance

- Two formulations of governance:
 - *instrumental-rational*: a technical approach, which sees governing bodies ensuring certain strategic and operational priorities are set and overseen to enhance the quality and standards of schools
 - *agonistic-political*: a more political approach, designed to provide responsiveness to contextual situations and local autonomy. (Wilkins & Gobby, forthcoming)

The rise of neo-liberalism

- a political and economic movement which oversaw the rise of market forces as the driving factor for decision making at national and local levels; (Connell, 2013)
- most enthusiastically endorsed during the 1980s by political leaders from the western world seeking a more liberal approach to the economy;
- A period characterised "*by increased private-sector involvement in formerly public services; by the fetishisation of the market as a mechanism for regulating social and economic relations; and by the privileging of private-sector knowledge over professional knowledge*". (Courtney, McGinity and Gunter, 2017: 3).

Academisation

- Education Reform Act (1988) introduced local/grant maintained school system and reduced influence of local authorities;
- First academies introduced in 2002 and, despite heavy government influence, only reached 207 by end of decade;
- shift in central government policy in England since 2010 has encouraged even greater independence and autonomy of state maintained schools;

What is an academy?

- A company compliant with charity law and accountable to Parliament and the Secretary of State for Education.
- Funded directly by government, they have license over curriculum and (partially) admissions;
- Various forms include free schools, studio schools, university technical colleges, special schools and pupil referral units.

Academies in England

Phase	Open	Applied	Total
Primary	5621	512	6133
Secondary	2621	102	2723
Special	349	55	404
Alternative	137	18	155
Totals	8728	687	9415

A total of 9415 by July, 2019 an increase of 3.2% since last year.

Trust Size	Academies	% Academies	Trusts	% Trusts	%change
1	1596	18.3%	1596	57.4%	-2.2%
2	578	6.6%	289	10.4%	-0.6%
3--5	1886	21.6%	497	17.9%	+0.6%
6--10	1863	21.3%	253	9.1%	+1.4%
11--20	1387	15.9%	101	3.6%	+0.6%
21--30	668	7.7%	27	1.0%	+0.2%
31--40	380	4.4%	11	0.4%	+0.1%
41+	370	4.2%	7	0.3%	+0.1%
Total	8728	100%	2830	100%	+7.5%

Multi-academy trusts (MATs)

- A multi-academy trust (MAT) is established to undertake a strategic collaboration across a number of schools;
- The MAT is accountable for the performance of each school in the group, although each can still have their own governing body which operates subject to delegation of power from the trust;
- All staff will be employed by one employer and the trust can share the additional reporting responsibilities required of an academy.

Addendum: Church of England MATs

- Memorandum of understanding with the DfE which stipulates that the diocese owns Church of England schools and has the first opportunity to show it is capable of providing a solution if a school is struggling;
- Diocesan board(s) of education (and DDE) central to establishing and running MAT;
- DBEs actively exploring hubs and umbrella trusts (with DfE support).

CONSEQUENCES



Opaque systems

- Overall, the school-based education system in England has changed radically, from a transparent national system of schools with their own legal identity and management[...] into a highly fragmented and opaque system; (9)
- Decisions in maintained schools taken by governors appointed by an open process are - in academies - now often taken by 'trustees', whose appointment remains opaque, and through processes that are not subject to rules on openness which apply across other areas of public life; (5)
- At least one MAT explicitly scrapped the notion of governing bodies for the 25 academies in 2016 apparently claiming at the time that other MATs had already done the same 'without being "honest" about it'. (24)

Reduced democracy?

Greany & Higham (2018):

- MATs encouraged to grow or merge by the DfE in search of efficiencies and 'economies of scale';
- As MATs get larger managerial levels increases, meaning that the 'bureaucracy' of the LA is replaced by another hierarchical authority, but without a local democratic mandate.

National Audit Commission (2018)

- 47 per cent of children in England now in academies;
- Vast majority of academies are now in MATs.

MATs and school governance

- In MATs trustees are able to decide whether to appoint governing bodies (LGBs) for individual schools and, if any, governance functions;
- Some MATs may appoint LGBs in an advisory capacity as a link to parents and the local community, whereas others may delegate more substantial responsibilities over standards or finance;
- Responsibilities of local governing bodies may diminish and some school governors may no longer be required;
- Possible benefits of a smaller governance structure to ensure clear and effective accountability to the executive board of trustees? (Wilkinson, 2017)



Research



Research Design

- Opportunity sample from MAT leadership development programmes;
- Started January 2017; data set reported here is from 41 MATs, based mainly on semi-structured interviews with most senior person available - typically CEOs (31/41);
- One of key themes emerging from the data and presented here is *Governance and Schemes of Delegation*

Atypical sample?

- There are 1596 single academy trusts;
- Meanwhile there are 1140 MATs of between 2 and 20 schools (a total of 5714 academies);
- This sample of 41 reported here is composed of MATs which have chosen to engage with our development programme;
- Sample takes no account of larger MATs, those with a national footprint or 'mates MATs'.

No such thing as a typical MAT!

- The 41 MATs in this report range in size from 2- 17 academies and demonstrated the following range of features:
 - Local primary led MATs of 3-5 schools;
 - A geographically dislocated small MAT created through an alliance between former independent and state maintained schools;
 - Primary led MATs with secondary school(s);
 - Secondary led MATs;
 - Alternative provision MAT;
 - University sponsored MAT;
 - Church of England MATs.

Analysis to date

- All interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed;
- Full data analysis has so far taken place on 41 interviews undertaken in 2017 & 18;
- 20 of these MATs were designated Community, 21 Church of England.

Findings



Governance in MATs

There are two parts to this exploration:

- What is structure of the trust? i.e. members and trustees;
- What is happening to governing bodies at individual school level?



Governance in MATs

Governance at Trust level

- Variation of between three and five members (average = 4);
 - in some instances members evolved from lead academy;
 - For C of E trusts there was strong evidence of diocesan involvement;
- Trustees between 5 and 14 (average 9):
 - Evidence of desire to upskill

Changing members

"we have some members that have grown with us from being an individual school, ... and they are a bit time-expired";

"We started off with three members that were trustees and now we've separated membership in functions";

"we have members who are the guardians of the ethos of the trust"

Developing Board of Trustees

"We started off with about five very lovely numpties and we've now got a really good skillset"

"We went away from a representative model - now everybody on the board is there because they've got a skills base or because they're a church MAT there are 2 people from a diocese perspective";

"There is only one trustee from when I started and I'm on my third Chair"

"If you're a trustee, you've got to have the big picture. If you can't think trust, you're probably in the wrong place";

"We did a gap analysis and sourced people for the skills that we needed";



Governance at school level

From body to committee

- “When you’re encouraging schools to come into the MAT, you’re effectively saying to the people that will make the decision, ‘You’re going to have less power’.”
- “We do feel it is useful to have a local level of accountability”

A range of views

"Those schools that were in at the very beginning had just carried on with their governing bodies and didn't see themselves as part of the wider organisation";

"Governing bodies are disingenuous - governance is with trust board as the MAT is a formalised business";

"If I had it my way again, I would have disbanded all local governing bodies";

"I really feel committed to keeping local governing bodies. I think the principle of the local school community having a voice and a role in governance is key so I don't want to be a trust that gets rid of them because they're a nuisance, but they are a nuisance";

"we think between six and nine governors can probably do the job".

28 participants indicated their trust had retained the title of 'Local Governing Board'; 7 = 'Committee'; 4 = 'Advisory Boards'

Schemes of Delegation

"We changed the name to local governing committees (n.b. councils)";

"Schools that find it the hardest to cope with that are the more successful ones";

"Local governing bodies with a very clear remit of what governance means at that level and why that's different to when they were maintained school governing bodies";

"We don't want them attacking heads, but we do want them to hold heads to account";

"So, it's giving the local community a voice, but limiting the powers"

"They will do the stuff that we can't do from the centre, all the stuff governors used to do. So, they'll do the community stuff, links with the church, church school ethos, links with the parents, they'll be at the school fete, and have working parties and do all of that stuff. They may well help with some appointments. We'll see".

In summary

“Each school in the MAT has kept a local governing body (which is a misnomer), but they wanted to keep that name. Advisory Group would be better. So, the local governing bodies are there to ensure the ethos of the school is maintained, to make sure safeguarding is robust, to engage with the community to make sure their voice is heard, to support the headteacher, to ensure standards are maintained and the school improvement plan is sustained.” (CEO, 15 school MAT)

Final thoughts

- Half the school population in academies, most of which have become MATs;
- Governance at trust level becoming more skills based (n.b. church MATs);
- Fundamental change to governance at school level - reduction of local governing body size and scope - often renamed committees/advisory boards;
- Perceived purpose of local governance is to hold headteachers/heads of school to account for pupil outcomes;
- Whither democracy?

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- Perceived purpose of local governance is to hold headteachers/heads of school to account for pupil outcomes;
- **Whither democracy?**

Thank you!

Contact details:

Dr Trevor Male
t.male@ucl.ac.uk
[@maletrevor](#)

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