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Building Trusts: MAT leadership and coherence of vision, strategy and operations

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Loic Menzies,
Sam Baars,
Kate Bowen-Viner and
Eleanor Bernardes
LKMco

-
Katy Theobald
Ambition School Leadership
-
Chris Kirk
CJK Associates

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Foreword

**James Toop, CEO,
Ambition School Leadership**

School improvement at scale can only occur with great leadership. The best multi-academy trusts (MATs) are transforming the lives of disadvantaged children and doing it across multiple schools, many of which had previously been underperforming before joining the MAT. This is thanks to the work of great leadership, teaching and governance at every level of the organisation.

Such is the impact of a great academy trust – transforming pupil outcomes at scale - we wanted to understand precisely what these high-performing MATs do and what choices their leaders make. As MATs are so new, we need new research to understand them and it is vital that we share what we find with the leaders of trusts that are starting or undertaking their development journey. We want them to learn from those who have gone before them.

This research is the largest study of its kind to date and we have worked with over 40 CEOs and surveyed the staff from 22 MATs. The insight we have gathered shows that two things are critical to running an effective and sustainable MAT: leadership and coherence. The highest-performing MATs had coherent strategies, and these strategies were defined and shaped by the CEOs, executives and trustees.

Trusts of all sizes were involved in the research but these findings are most vital for CEOs of small and medium-size MATs

Trusts of all sizes were involved in the research but these findings are most vital for CEOs of small and medium-size MATs, the trustees and schools considering joining MATs. These leaders face a number of challenges as their trusts develop – and we have identified the ‘break points’ that MATs face as they grow.

Our motivation is to codify what the best MATs do so more leaders can use it to inform their approach. We will also be using the findings in the Executive Educators programme that we run for executive leaders looking to grow and develop sustainable MATs. I believe that every leader who reads this report will find something that will help them make sense of what they have experienced in leadership or think in a different way about the challenges they face.

While the research has lots to say about operational models and strategy, it always comes back to one thing: the MAT’s mission and purpose is the north star that guides everything. The mission that drives us at Ambition is to support the transformational work of school leaders who are delivering improvements in schools and ensuring that disadvantaged children can have the great education that will open doors for them in their adult lives. This summary shares our view on how MAT leaders can do this most effectively.



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Executive Summary

The increasing prominence of multi-academy trusts (MATs) within the UK education system has prompted growing scrutiny of the comparative performance of different MATs¹, the characteristics of the most effective MATs^{2,3,4} and the different routes to MAT growth⁵.

This research builds on the existing evidence base on MAT types, growth and effectiveness by exploring the different ways MATs operate and how they choose their approach.

The report is based on qualitative analysis of structured interviews with 34 MAT CEOs alongside quantitative analysis of 346 survey responses from members of 22 MATs' central teams and academy senior leadership teams. Taken together, we draw on insights from 47 different MATs.

The report is structured around the key questions MATs need to ask themselves in order to decide how to run their organisation, and explores the range of ways the MATs in our study have answered them.

We begin with the fundamental question of vision: what is it that a MAT wants to achieve?

Vision: A mental image of what the future will or could be like⁶

We then explore how this translates, first, into their intended and then, their actual strategy. The latter is important, because context and circumstances are critical considerations in selecting a MAT's plan of action, even when this means departing from the ideal that might have been pursued if starting with a blank slate.

Strategy: A plan of action designed to achieve a long-term or overall aim⁷

Throughout, we show the implications that different strategies have for MATs' operating models.

Operating model: the bridge between strategy and day-to-day operations that guides the team, provides the context, and enables the behaviours that will realise the strategy and vision⁸

A key element of a MAT's operating model is its scheme of delegation, or who does what, and the operational structures it puts into place. We began this project by considering these structures on a continuum running from complete centralisation, where responsibilities and functions are held by the central team, to complete autonomy, where they are held by individual schools. However, we soon found that there are a

1 Francis, B and Hutchings, M (2017) *Chain Effects 2017*. London: The Sutton Trust.

2 Ofsted (2016) *HMCI's commentary: high performing multi-academy trusts*. Manchester: Ofsted.

3 DfE (2015) *Characteristics of successful multi-academy trusts*. London: DfE.

4 House of Commons Education Committee (2017) *Multi-academy trusts*. London: House of Commons.

5 DfE (2016) *Multi-academy trusts: Good practice guidance and expectations for growth*. London: DfE.

6 Oxford English Dictionary, 2018, en.oxforddictionaries.com/

7 *ibid.*

8 EY, 2016, [www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Operating-models/\\$FILE/Operating-models.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Operating-models/$FILE/Operating-models.pdf)

multitude of ways of being devolved or centralised: while some MATs pursued what we describe as ‘collaborative convergence’⁹ others granted schools autonomy from the centre or operated around devolved, semi-autonomous clusters.

The richness of the data that we collected, encompassing larger scale quantitative tools and more detailed interviews, allows us to take a nuanced approach to understanding the range of approaches MATs take and the rationales that lie behind them.

We initially approached this research with a framework of coherence: believing that there is no single strategy that predicts MAT success, but that it is important to see coherence between the vision, strategy and operating model. Our hypothesis was that a coherent MAT will have a clear vision for what the MAT is trying to achieve, a defined strategy that explains how it will achieve it, and the MAT’s operating model will be designed to support that strategy, so that the organisation has the right capabilities to deliver it. All levels within the MAT are aligned to the vision and strategy. We found that the sector may not yet be mature enough to test this theory fully because many MATs are still developing their operating models and because strategic terms like ‘centralisation’ mean different things in different MATs. However, we have been able to draw out indications of how MATs create coherence by describing how vision informs strategy and how strategy can inform operations.

Finally, we found that MATs do not only make their decisions once. Instead they are constantly adapting and adjusting their strategies. This results in a number of ‘break points’ where a MAT has to break with a previous strategic or operational approach and make a shift. These inflection points are often associated with a change in scale, but we found that they also occur in response to geographical factors, the national policy context and the type of schools within a MAT.

9 Schools in a MAT work together to voluntarily define an agreed approach

Report structure

In **Section 1** we explore MATs' intended strategies. These are founded on a vision – i.e. what the MAT wants to achieve, both in terms of pupil outcomes and in terms of what sort of organisational culture it wants to have. While all MAT visions refer to pupil outcomes, they differ in relation to the specificity of these outcomes, the degree to which academic outcomes have primacy over others, and the extent to which pupil outcomes sit alongside broader considerations of the operating culture of the MAT.

MATs then develop a strategy for achieving their vision based on their theory of change - in other words, what they think is the most effective way of bringing about their vision. Their decisions take into account what they consider to be the most effective way of improving standards and how they believe they should go about delivering this. A MAT might for example have a vision of all pupils in all schools achieving academic excellence; they might believe a strategy of implementing a knowledge rich curriculum across all their schools is the best way of achieving this; and they might therefore pursue an operating model which emphasises investment in central curriculum development expertise. The key strategic choice that we see MATs taking is between allowing schools to retain autonomy and local identity, or aligning them around a standardised approach to curriculum or pedagogy. We show that a MAT can achieve alignment and standardisation by defining an approach from the centre, or by facilitating collaborative convergence. However, whether MATs achieve alignment through central definition or collaborative convergence, they then need to decide how to bring a newly joining school into alignment.

Section 2 of the report demonstrates that MATs' actual strategies are not always the same as their intended strategies. While founded on their preferred approach, their actual strategies are developed in response to circumstances and thus what a MAT can do. Their ideal strategy might, for example, be to develop a shared approach to teaching and learning. However, they may find that the schools they are working with are at such different stages of school improvement, or resources are so scarce, that they need to focus their strategy on securing more limited convergence than they might ideally wish for. We show that this in turn has important implications for a MAT's operating model – in other words, the blueprint for how the organisation runs, including who does what day-to-day.

Section 3 sets out MATs' future plans. These are partly shaped by MATs' assessments of their current performance and effectiveness, which provide a steer on future areas for development. We show how MATs vary in the extent to which their central teams agree on their effectiveness in different areas, and the operational priorities that arise from these judgments. In general, MATs voice little enthusiasm for significantly changing the degree of standardisation of different operating areas, though respondents tend to err on the side of further standardisation. We consider how MATs' future growth plans tend to be expressed in terms of reaching a specific number of schools or pupils, or developing a hub or cluster model, and how MATs also coach their growth plans in terms of moving into new localities or regions, taking on particular phases or types of school, or merging with other MATs, although these priorities appear to be less prevalent.



1 What is our vision and our intended strategy?

MATs have different visions and these encompass both what they want to achieve for their pupils and what type of organisational culture they want to promote. While MATs tend to share similar goals for what they want to achieve for pupils, how these aims are balanced and articulated varies from MAT to MAT. For example, some MATs prioritise pupils' future employability, others prioritise academic excellence and others prioritise access to a broad range of enrichment activities. Meanwhile, in terms of their organisational culture, some believe that MATs should be a network of relatively autonomous community-based schools, each with their own identity, while others are aiming to build a network of schools with a more standardised, guaranteed offer. Given that most MATs have broadly similar visions in terms of pupil outcomes, the differentiating factors for MAT visions are their clarity and specificity, and the extent to which academic outcomes are seen as the priority above and beyond other pupil-focused aims such as supporting long term career paths or building social and cultural capital.


The articulation of a specific vision does not translate directly into a particular type of MAT strategy. Instead, MATs have to ask themselves what their theory of change is; their approach to delivering a particular outcome. For instance, MATs will often define their approach to school improvement based on how they best believe they can raise standards. For some it might mean freeing up and developing teachers and leaders to concentrate on pedagogy. For others they may believe a particular approach to curriculum achieves this.

Implementing MATs' different responses to these questions relating to vision, organisational cultures and theories of change requires different operating models involving varying configurations of functions and structures. Diversity in these operating models cannot be captured by a simple continuum from 'centralised' to 'decentralised' approaches. For example many MATs have staff employed in central teams, often for the purpose of managing school improvement. However, in some MATs their role involves facilitating school-to-school collaboration, while in others they are charged with developing and rolling out a common approach to curriculum. In both scenarios there is a centralised school improvement function, but the role is performed differently depending on the MAT's strategy.

While we explored possible relationships between MATs' strategies and performance, we did not find any clear links. This is perhaps because there is 'more than one way to skin a cat'; categorisations of strategy are too blunt to be meaningful; and/or because measures of MAT performance are currently insufficiently valid. However, throughout this section CEOs provide their own perspectives on the way in which their strategies support pupil outcomes.



Summary

- When establishing their vision, CEOs begin with a view as to what they want to achieve for their pupils. While most MATs have broadly similar visions in terms of what they want to achieve for pupils, they might for example decide to place relatively different degrees of emphasis on pupil attainment or ensuring all pupils can access a range of experiences.
 - MATs' visions are also shaped by the type of organisational culture they want to have. This includes the relationship they have with their local communities, their schools' ability to retain their individual identities, and the mix of schools that sit within the trust.
 - MATs translate their vision into an intended strategy differently depending on their (often implicit) theory of change. For instance, what do they think is the best way of raising standards?
 - Survey data from 17 MATs shows that:
 - Most MATs consider "setting a common vision and culture while maintaining local autonomy in delivery" and "ensuring each school works to strengthen its community" to be very important.
 - Most consider generating efficiencies and freeing up school resources to allow greater focus on teaching and learning a priority.
 - MATs differ considerably in terms of whether they seek to "create consistent pedagogy across all schools".
 - Cluster analysis identified three main groups of MATs in terms of their preferred strategies. These clusters revealed that when MATs focus their strategy on autonomy and identity they appear to focus less on teaching and pedagogy, and vice versa.
 - A focus on teaching and pedagogy rather than autonomy and individual schools' identities tends to be linked to conducting key functions in a more centralised way.
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1.1 What is our MAT aiming to achieve?

In setting their vision – what they want to achieve – MATs consider both what they are trying to achieve for pupils and what sort of organisational culture they want to promote. Interviews revealed limited divergence in terms of MATs’ visions for what they sought to achieve for pupils. Most referenced a variation upon the idea of “excellence for every child” or “the best for all pupils.” Nonetheless, there were some differences, for example in relation to their prioritisation of ‘academic excellence for all’, maximising league table performance or pursuing development of the ‘whole child’. Alongside pupil outcomes, views on organisational culture, such as a desire to protect individual schools’ identities, were an equally, if not more important element of MATs’ visions.

1.1.1 What do we want for our pupils?

Most MATs emphasised the importance of an overarching vision at MAT level and, as one put it, ensuring schools ‘adhered’ to this.

Differences between visions for pupils were limited, with most CEOs referring to all schools within their MAT becoming good or outstanding, and all pupils achieving the best possible outcomes. Indeed, stated aims were frequently somewhat generic.

“Everything we do is centred on...improving education”

- MAT 33

“To improve the life chances of all children where we have the capacity to make a difference”

- MAT 2 (cluster 1)

However, where there were differences in MATs’ visions these often hinged on the extent to which they focused on pupil attainment compared to providing a broad range of experiences and developing the ‘whole child’.

i) What are our expectations for pupil attainment in this MAT?

School improvement was frequently cited as a MAT’s mission or raison d’être. However, MATs sometimes had different visions for what constituted ‘improving pupil achievement’. In one MAT for example it was about exam outcomes and school rankings, whereas in another it was about high academic attainment, beyond league table measures.

“It is about trying to ensure that all our schools rank in the top 20% by comparison with students in similar schools by their first inspection following conversion.”

- MAT 42

“We don’t do things to enhance performance tables... We don’t believe in doing things to improve our performance in performance tables themselves. We believe in preparing young people for rigorous education that will put them in good stead for the rest of their lives. We are about ensuring the children... enjoy access to a truly rigorous academic education.”

- MAT 30



MATs with visions that focused on pupil attainment tended to reflect this in an operating model that prioritised improving teaching and learning. Often this was pursued through a more centrally delivered school improvement strategy, with an operating model that invested in the MAT's central school improvement function. Specific practices could include: regular school data drops, termly inspections by central school improvement staff, and centrally coordinated lesson observations.

“There's a relentless pursuit of improvement in teaching and learning. Because that would underpin absolutely everything that we do.”

- MAT 23

A focus on school improvement and improved academic performance did not necessarily mean a MAT's vision did not also emphasise a rounded education. For example, MAT 11 argued that its main aim was to “take on schools who have been in special measures in deprived parts of the region, so that we can help them improve their performance.” Despite this, it had also rolled out trust-wide enrichment programmes and initiatives because “we think education is about more than just sitting in a class all day, we want students to engage with other activities around sport, music, drama and art.” As another CEO explained:

“When we talk about outcomes, of course we mean examination outcomes, but we also mean something much broader than that.”

- MAT 28

ii) To what extent does this MAT want to ensure all pupils have access to a particular range of experiences and enrichment activities?

Some MATs' visions were more focused on wider opportunities, developing the ‘whole child’, raising aspirations, or preparing pupils for the world of work. In some faith-based MATs, such priorities were specifically premised on a Christian ethos.

“(Our) core focus is taking that young person and look at their journey, giving them opportunities, giving them confidence and welfare, looking at their progress and welfare and making sure they have got the opportunities to grow and develop and have the best life chances they could have.”

- MAT 43

Because its vision was focused on welfare and confidence, MAT 43 therefore prioritised unification of pastoral systems across its schools by creating opportunities for pupil leadership in ‘houses’ that were unified across the MAT's senior and middle schools.

Visions focused on broader experiences and holistic development led other MATs to set centralised expectations around enrichment. For example in one MAT enrichment was baked into the their funding agreement:

“We want to deliver inspirational enrichment events... our schools deliver their curriculum but we want to add value by the enrichment opportunities that we offer... In the funding agreement... we want all of our schools to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum. And we're very clear about educating the whole child in which part of our enrichment activities look at that.”

- MAT 25



1.1.2 What sort of organisational culture do we want to promote?

MATs' visions are not only focused on what they want to achieve for pupils, but also what sort of organisational culture they want to have. This includes the relationship they have with their local communities, their schools' ability to retain their individual identities, and the mix of schools that sit within the trust.

i) How important is the local community in shaping our organisational culture?

Many MATs emphasise the need to be responsive to their communities and this can result in a decentralised approach to extra-curricular activities, parent and community engagement, and governance. There are different reasons for a community-focused approach. In some cases the reasons are vision-driven, with MATs explicitly setting out to establish schools that are at the heart of, or uniquely tailored to, their community. However, in other cases, community engagement is more of a means to an end.

Community engagement is sometimes believed to help deliver a more effective, context-sensitive pedagogy. In other cases MATs want to draw on their local communities' skills, resources and support. The CEO of MAT 25 for example explained that even though they no longer needed to do so, they had retained local governing bodies to engage members of the local community and "reap the benefits" of their support.

In contrast, some MATs have abolished local governing bodies considering them to be redundant once the MAT has reached a certain scale. There is therefore sometimes a trade-off between initial intentions to foster a community focus and the pressures of scale – something we explore further in [sections 2.1.3](#) and [2.5](#).

"We started off trying to be all things to all people: 'Come and join our trust and you can keep your autonomy'... So we set up a trust, we kept local governing bodies, the first three years there were local governing bodies in place... schools transferred in, and the trust board started, very much, a representation model... That worked when we had three schools, but by the time we'd grown to five it was obvious it wasn't going to work on two levels. Firstly it wasn't going to work because there were conflicts of interest where people couldn't necessarily separate the school they were from with the needs of the trust and... there was a disconnect between the responsibilities, or accountabilities of a trust board and a governing body because ultimately the governing bodies are committees of the trust board."

- MAT 27

ii) To what extent do we want to encourage individual schools to retain their own identities?

Cluster analysis of MATs' survey responses (see [section 1.2](#)) revealed that the extent to which MATs prioritised autonomy and identity was a key distinguishing factor between our two largest clusters. Thus, while some MATs wanted to establish a family of relatively autonomous schools, uniquely tailored to their communities, others were aiming for a tighter family, united around a single vision.

One MAT emphasised its commitment to a vision in which each school was at the 'heart of its community.' This was partly because it operated in small rural communities. This affected their approach to branding and communication, with the CEO reporting that in order to do this they needed to avoid "having a bland one-size-fits-all trust where all schools look the same, say the same thing and are masked by a corporate entity" (MAT 40).



MAT 40's focus on the community had also affected which functions were prioritised for centralisation, though this was beginning to change. At first they had concentrated on centralising "functions from a business perspective around finance, data, workforce etc." Meanwhile school-to-school networks for professional development were used as the main means of improving standards through professional development:

"Maths leads, English leads, SEND leads for example come together in geographic hubs so that there is an effective opportunity to share good practice."

- MAT 40

As the CEO explained, the MAT's offer was therefore that "what they gain is they work with us for professional development for teachers and leaders in the schools."

On the other hand, despite its community-based vision, the CEO recognised that the "very high level of devolved autonomy" was beginning to shift as they wanted to avoid engendering a "silo mentality." They were therefore shifting their strategy to promote "collegiate and collaborative working." As part of this strategy the MAT would establish expectations for regularly reporting to the board, and some consistency around policy development and practice. A shift in strategy was therefore expected to change the way the MAT operated.

Operating models that leave schools with a high degree of autonomy can also be a consequence of a MAT's desire to be a diverse trust encompassing a range of schools. CEOs with this type of vision therefore reported electing to allow schools to maintain their own individual mission statements and ethos as part of an identity preserving strategy:

"We will not change your uniform, we won't change your signs, you don't see (the MAT's name) anywhere... we completely let them keep their own identity because they're serving very, very different communities."

- MAT 10 (cluster 1)

On the other hand, MATs with autonomy-promoting visions often still feel they need a set of shared values to underpin all their schools, since without these MATs can lose sight of what they are trying to achieve:

"I think it is very important to have a set of values that you adhere to and that guide you as you develop. There are too many places where you can get sidetracked or lose sight of what you're trying to achieve. So you need a very clear set of values that is agreed amongst your team."

- MAT 23

The decision to establish a heterogeneous MAT is not always vision-based. In some cases it is a pragmatic strategy based on a theory about how to improve standards through effective teaching and learning (see [section 1.2.1](#)). In other cases it is a strategy for recruiting new schools and establishing positive working relationships (see [section 2.5](#)).



School autonomy is not a priority for all MATs. Some have a vision of a more unified family of schools that prioritises a common identity. However, the balance between protecting schools' individual identities and ensuring they adopt a shared identity with the MAT can be difficult for central teams to negotiate. One CEO, despite leading a cluster 1 MAT that placed emphasis on protecting individual schools' identities in its survey responses, articulated a desire for unity in their interview:

“What I think is a weakness across the academies program is how to create a sense of unity across MATs so people stop seeing themselves as an individual academy trying to maintain individual autonomy. We have tried to address this head on by saying if you are part of our organisation you are a [MAT] head first, not of a particular academy. That notion of ‘if you are part of [the MAT], whatever role you are in you are a [MAT] admin, [MAT] cleaner etc. first’ – that has meant we are ‘all one team’ and we are really clear about that. If you get that right and it is understood across your MAT it is great.”

- MAT 2 (cluster 1)

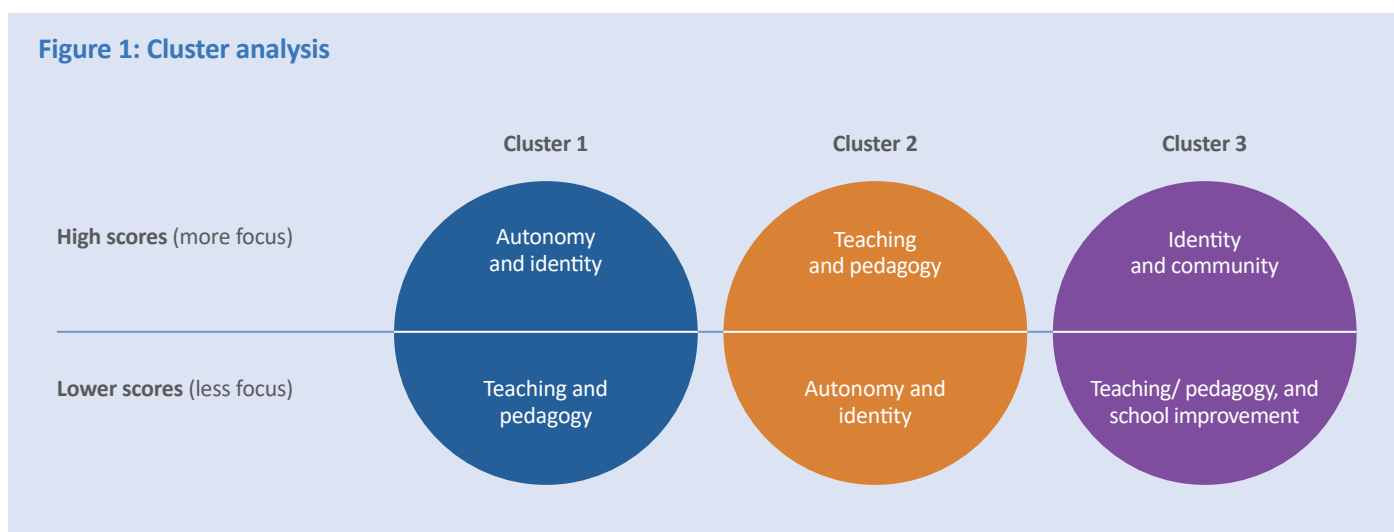
Despite the links between vision, strategy and operating model identified here, vision does not translate directly into practice. As we discuss in [section 1.2](#), MATs can have differing theories of change regarding how best to achieve a given aim. Furthermore, as we explore in [section 2](#), MATs are not always able to choose their approach freely.



1.2 What is our theory of change?

MATs’ intended strategies depend not just on the content of their visions, but also on how they decide to pursue them based on their beliefs about the best way to achieve a particular outcome. The ‘organisational culture’ MATs specify in their visions comes in to play here. Despite having a common trust-wide goal, some MATs believe that different schools can (and should) pursue that goal in different ways in response to their context. Meanwhile some MATs seek to establish a united model and drive it from the centre. Others want all schools to go in the same direction, but for individual school leaders to define this direction of travel as part of a process of ‘collaborative convergence’.

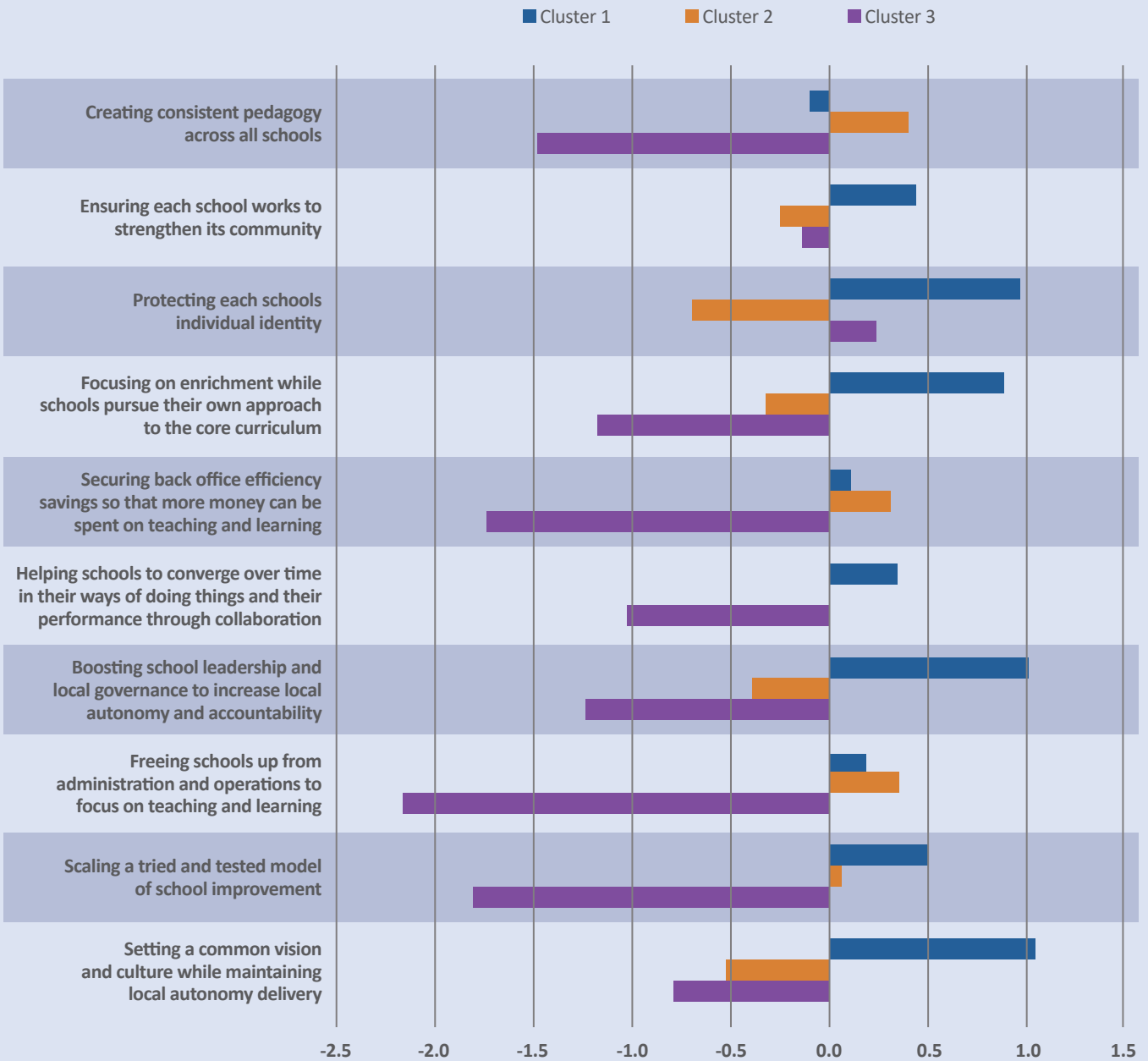
As illustrated in **Figure 1**, cluster analysis¹⁰ revealed three main groups of MATs in terms of their intended strategies and suggests that when MATs focus on autonomy and identity (as in cluster 1), they tend to focus less on determining MAT-wide approaches to teaching and pedagogy. Meanwhile, where teaching and pedagogy take precedent (as they do in cluster 2 MATs), key functions are often more centralised, although cluster 1 and cluster 3’s emphasis on autonomy, identity and community seems to be linked to centralisation of parent and community engagement. The cluster analysis suggests, at a high level, that MATs’ decisions about strategy involve a series of trade-offs and choices of approach. We explore these in more detail below.



¹⁰ Based on 17 MATs with five or more survey responses, cluster 3 is very small – with only two MATs, so most fell into either cluster 1 or 2.

We asked CEOs and their central team members the extent to which their MAT was described by a range of strategy statements. **Figure 2** shows the average (mean) scores that respondents in each MAT cluster attached to each strategy statement. High scores mean the description was “exactly like us”, while low scores mean the description was “not at all like us.” For each strategy statement, zero represents the mean score for all responses across all MATs.

Figure 2: Average (mean) cluster responses to questions regarding strategy



Scaled mean score across all MATs in each cluster. "Lower scores represent "not at all like us"; higher scores represent "exactly like us"

We asked CEOs and their staff to say to what extent their MAT was described by each of the strategy statements above. The chart shows the difference in average (mean) scores for each cluster. A high score means the description was 'exactly like us'.



1.2.1 What is the most effective way of raising school standards?

Different MATs have different views as to what is involved in improving school standards. To some extent, these views are informed by their vision (see [section 1.1](#)) but beliefs about how to achieve a vision are key too. For example, what makes an effective curriculum and pedagogy? What role can administration and back office functions play in raising standards? What role should pastoral and behavioural policies play? To what extent is 'consistency' in pedagogical approaches valuable?

Survey responses from 14 different CEOs revealed that "securing back office efficiency savings so that more money can be spent on teaching and learning" and "freeing schools up from administration and operations to focus on teaching and learning" were the most popular strategies and there was little variation in this. Thus, back office functions (such as finance, IT, HR, audit, estates and procurement) were the most centralised functions after recruitment of principals.

In contrast "boosting school leadership and local governance to increase local autonomy and accountability" was a far less popular a strategy, as was "focusing on enrichment while schools pursue their own approach to the core curriculum", though there was more variation and disagreement in relation to the latter. Meanwhile interviews highlighted differing views on the extent to which curriculum and pedagogy should be standardised and the role of behavioural and pastoral policies.

i) How can centralised administration and back office functions support school improvement?

Given that "securing back office efficiency savings so that more money can be spent on teaching and learning" and "freeing schools up from administration and operations to focus on teaching and learning" were the most popular strategies amongst CEOs, it is unsurprising that back office functions were reported to be the most centralised element of MATs' operating models. However, although most MATs eventually centralise back office functions, they do so for different reasons. In some cases MATs centralise for convenience or in order to secure economies of scale. Others do so for more strategic reasons linked to their beliefs about school improvement, according to which freeing up teachers and leaders from 'distractions' is a key mechanism for raising standards. Similar operational decisions can therefore rest on different strategies, in turn driven by different theories of change.

"For us it's about doing our utmost to ensure that the leadership teams and the staff, the teachers and the support staff, who are in any of our schools, can actually do what we believe they came into the trust to achieve, which is support pupils. Because there are myriad distractions in a school that take people away from kids... what we say to our head teachers is, 'Forget about your finance, forget about your buildings, you're probably not experts in that anyway. We'll do that, you do some teaching.'"

- MAT 31

Other MATs believe that it is strong oversight rather than a reduced burden that improves standards. These MATS tend to believe that centralised systems help to deliver this. This belief around operating culture drives an operating model which involves enhanced information and performance management systems that are used to monitor school performance and identify schools requiring targeted support and intervention.



Centralised information management can also service a collaboration-focused vision, depending on how information is used. For example, according to the CEO of MAT 19 centralised information management can “[encourage] a culture of openness, transparency and trust between schools, and between schools and the central team.”

ii) Should curriculum and pedagogy be context dependent or standardised?

MATs operate on a spectrum, from offering schools full autonomy in their curriculum and pedagogy to setting one or both centrally. While this is partly informed by MATs’ visions (for example the extent to which they seek to be community based), the decision is also linked to beliefs about whether establishing a common curriculum and/or pedagogy is an effective way of improving standards. As we explore in more detail in [section 2](#), MATs’ individual contexts also play an important role in these strategic decisions. However, while we expected to observe a correlation between MATs’ decisions to standardise curriculum and pedagogy and the sponsor/converter mix of their academies, this trend did not come across clearly in our data.

The largest divergence found in our survey between MATs’ degree of agreement with strategy statements was in relation to “creating consistent pedagogy across all schools.” For example, the median response from MAT 7 when asked to what extent (out of ten) this was their approach was three, whereas the median score from respondents in MAT 20 was nine. MATs that leave individual schools to determine curriculum and pedagogy are often driven by a belief that schools should be responsive to their local context. As the CEO of MAT 2 (a cluster 1 MAT) explained “it isn’t appropriate to have the same curriculum in different regions... different schools have different backgrounds.” Similarly, the CEO of MAT 13 argued “each school serves a distinct community so needs some autonomy.”

As well as geography, factors such as prior attainment and school size are also considered important grounds for heterogeneity of curriculum and pedagogy:

“Our smaller school has 35 on roll; how you would deliver that curriculum is very different to our 260 inner city primary.”

- MAT 37

Given many MATs’ beliefs about the role of context in shaping curriculum and pedagogy, MATs with schools operating in similar contexts sometimes have more closely aligned approaches. For instance, the CEO of MAT 28 explained that the curriculum is more similar in their primary schools than their secondaries because the former are “much more similar.” They also explained that another reason for avoiding an overly standardised approach to curriculum design and pedagogy was that they did not think that this was an effective way of getting the best out of their head teachers:

“Why would I bother having principals in the schools if I was just going to do it all myself? I want those principals to develop as leaders. So what we do is we sometimes offer them things and they have the right to say no or they have the right to say ‘We’re going to do it differently’.”

- MAT 28



On the other hand, MATs have to continually weigh up the benefits of a contextually sensitive and autonomy-promoting curriculum and pedagogy, against the benefits of a more standardised approach. This leads some to settle on a model of earned autonomy. As MAT 28's CEO explained, where approaches were evidenced and delivering results, schools within the MAT had to make a strong case if they did not want to adopt them:

“We all do basically Singapore maths, not least because we’ve seen a real positive change in attitudes and in rates of learning and in rates of progress... if you’re going to say no to Singapore maths and then your results or your attitudes to mathematics are poor you’re going to be held to account for that, because you turned down something that we were offering to you.”

- MAT 28

Similarly, MAT 27 explained that where standards are not met central policies may be imposed:

“We have one school at the moment that’s been quite vehemently holding on to the way they’ve always done things, and we allowed them to do it last year, and it was middling whether we wanted to continue with it, and said, ‘Okay, we will give you one more year at proving that, if you think this gets the right outcomes.’ We agreed the targets. If it doesn’t work it will have to change. It hasn’t worked so it is changing, and we are imposing something from the trust there.”

- MAT 27

Standardisation can bring a number of practical benefits such as increased opportunities to share resources and moderate work. The CEO of MAT 11 particularly highlighted the fact that sharing the same exam board led to cost reductions and that wider curriculum alignment facilitated cross-school collaboration.

“If students across schools all read the same texts at the same time, then we can organise poetry days based around those texts that allow kids from all the relevant schools to attend.”

- MAT 11

Given the potential benefits, some MATs are gradually shifting towards greater standardisation. For example, although MAT 10 is a cluster 1 MAT and emphasises its desire to preserve schools' autonomy, they are taking increasing steps to establish a particular approach to curriculum, pedagogy and the pastoral system:

“If you join our trust now it’s non-negotiable; you have to have our tracking and assessment system, in the early days you didn’t. If you join our trust we want you to have a learning enquiry based curriculum... you don’t have to exactly [use a specific version of this] ... but we need to see it being brilliant and to be honest nearly all of them they’ve got a very similar curriculum... we (also) want you to have a very positive behaviour policy. So we’ve got an overarching behaviour policy but if we were to take on a school where it was a very negative sanction-led policy we’d be questioning that.”

- MAT 10 (cluster 1)



MAT 30 also believes that ensuring schools spend an appropriate amount of time teaching different areas of the curriculum will raise standards:

“What we have done now is engage in a curriculum mapping exercise from 4 to 19, which, for us, is extraordinarily important in our work. So, in every subject that you go to in the [MAT], we have planned out in detail how each subject’s curriculum needs to be delivered, including the allocated amount of time that needs to go with the rubric of the examination itself. So, if I give you an example, a particular part of an exam that’s worth 15% of the total mark, why would you be spending 25% of your time on that 15%?... we’ve also built the concept... of what we call ‘iterative testing’... ensuring that each test that takes place every three weeks against our curriculum model, builds on the previous weeks.”

- MAT 30

Given the increased control over standards that comes with central prescription, a number of MATs have either increased, or plan to increase, centralisation as their trust grows.

iii) What role should pastoral and behavioural policies play?

Pupil policies differ depending on MATs’ visions and values. Some focus on ‘order’ and others ‘inclusion’ or minimising pupil exclusion. For instance at MAT 26 the focus was on avoiding excluding pupils due to the central team’s concerns about pupils’ future employment prospects and for the CEO of MAT 25 pupil policies are rooted in the belief that “the Church of England values all God’s children.”

However, policies also differ depending on MATs’ views as to what role policies play in school improvement. Some MATs consider a common behaviour policy the fundamental building block of school improvement. As the CEO of MAT 32 explained:

“We run consequence systems in all our schools. That’s non-negotiable. They have to happen, and that’s about putting in a system that, ultimately, brings back order in the community.”

- MAT 32

In contrast, another CEO warned against focusing significant time and energy on reviewing school policies. They argued that doing so diverts energy away from directly improving practice:

“We actually don’t hold with policy, we hold with practice.”

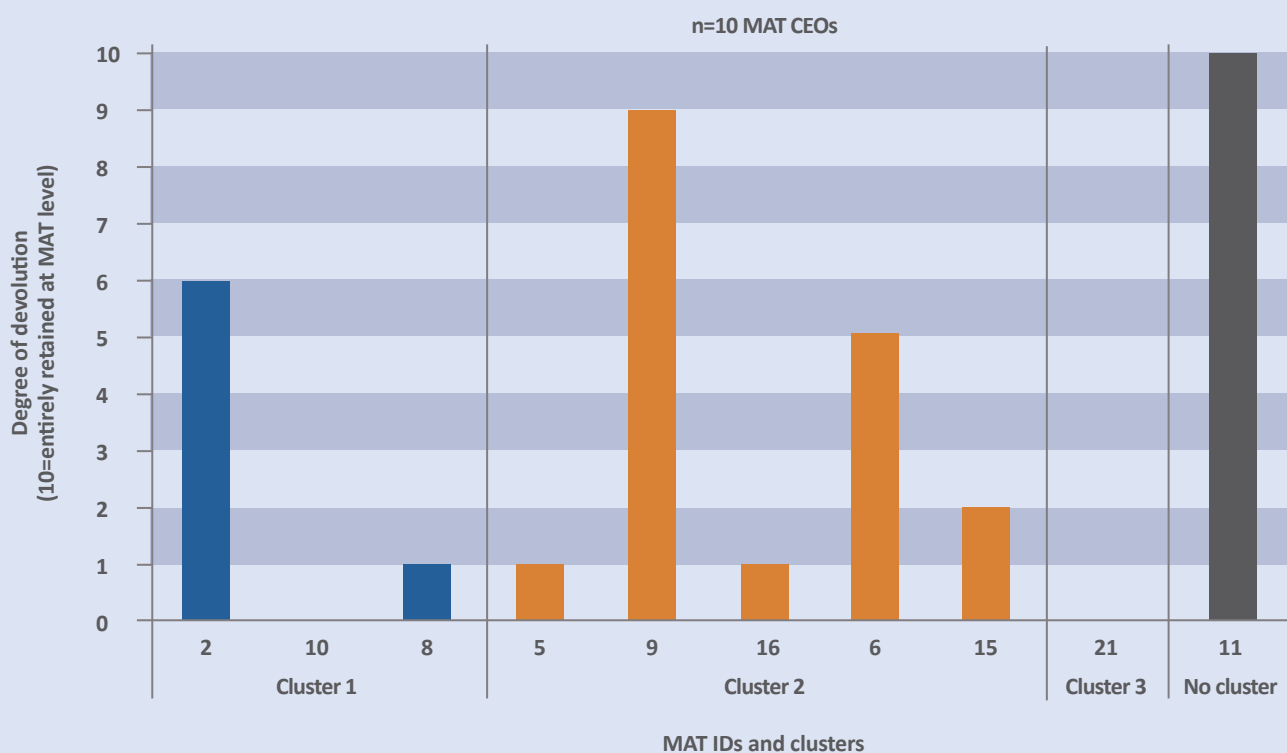
- MAT 31



Thus strategy is shaped both by beliefs about what matters, and about what works. We asked CEOs whether their pupil policies were "entirely devolved to school level" or "entirely retained at MAT level". We found wide variation in their responses, as shown in **Figure 3**.

Figure 3: The degree to which MATs centralise pupil policies

We asked CEOs whether their pupil policies, e.g. behaviour/uniform and the pastoral system, safeguarding and the role of form tutors, were “entirely devolved to school level” (0) or “entirely retained at MAT level” (10). We found wide variations in their responses.



1.2.2 Do we want to deliver our school improvement strategy through collaborative convergence, or by scaling a set approach?

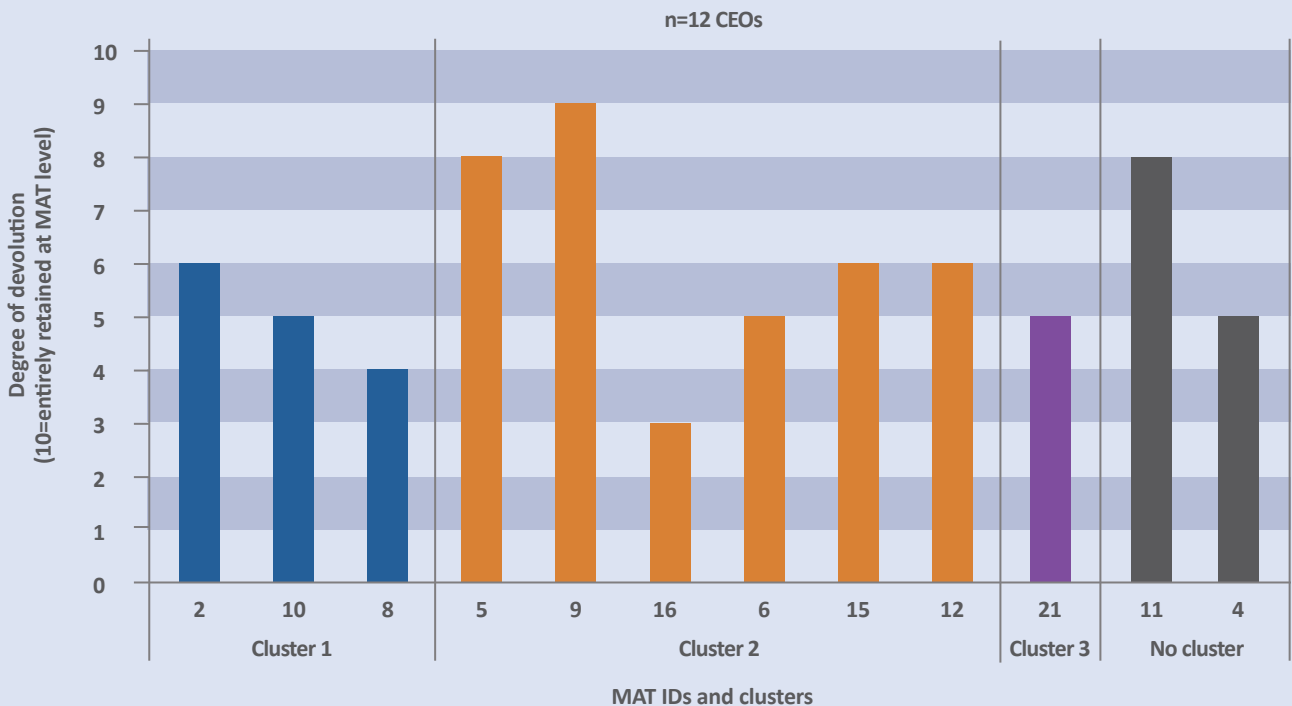
As we saw in [section 1.1](#), improving outcomes for children lies at the heart of most MATs' visions, but views on the end goal of improvement vary depending on MATs' visions of what outcomes they are trying to achieve for pupils and what sort of organisational culture they want to promote.

In [section 1.2.1](#) we saw that MATs have different beliefs about the most effective strategies for improving standards. Now we move on to consider how MATs seek to implement their chosen approach. This is not just about operational configurations, such as whether or not to employ a Director of Standards, but is underpinned by wider organisational cultures which dictate whether it is better to impose or facilitate change, and whether initiatives should be driven from the bottom or the top. For example, even though MATs tend to have staff at the centre with responsibility for school improvement, some do so in order to facilitate gradual or collaborative convergence, while others drive a set approach from the centre.

Overall, MATs tend to centralise the design and delivery of school improvement approaches. We asked CEOs whether the design and delivery of school improvement approaches was entirely devolved to schools (0) or entirely retained at MAT level (10). As shown in [Figure 4](#), the majority said this was determined at MAT level or shared evenly between the MAT and schools. Six of 12 MAT CEOs gave this area a score of more than 5 (implying a relatively centralised approach) and only two scored it less than 5 (implying a relatively decentralised approach).

Figure 4: Design and delivery of school improvement approaches

We asked CEOs whether the design and delivery of school improvement approaches was entirely devolved to schools (0) or entirely retained at MAT level (10). The majority said this was determined at MAT level or shared evenly between the MAT and schools.



As we discussed in [section 1.1.2](#), MATs' decisions about which strategy to pursue – whether centralised or devolved to individual schools – are underpinned by their organisational culture. Hence, vision-based questions are fundamental. However, strategic decisions are also shaped by MATs' theories of change about how best to achieve particular pupil outcomes; who is best placed to deliver change and how. Even when MATs tend to adopt a centralised approach to an area of their operations, as shown in [Figure 4](#), they differ in terms of whether they see a centralised role as directive, or as a facilitator of gradual collaborative convergence. For example, one CEO explained that their schools' curricula, particularly in EBacc subjects, had gradually converged "bottom up" with heads of department working "closely together to reach some level of commonality".

"Our model of getting to curriculum alignment in, for example, core subjects, has not been to say, 'Well the board or the chief exec or the director...has picked has picked this exam board, you're all going to do it.'"

- MAT 9 (cluster 2)

In contrast, MAT 30 emphasised the importance of "strands of consistency:"

"There are strands of consistency that everyone operates within that come from the top, that are debated each year, and probably more than that, but once they're agreed... are not open to being dropped. They're not open to negotiation. They must be adhered to... they are around things like the behaviour of children, the way in which we assess their progress, our systems to ensure that leaders are effectively developed in their work, our support for new and recently qualified teachers."

- MAT 30

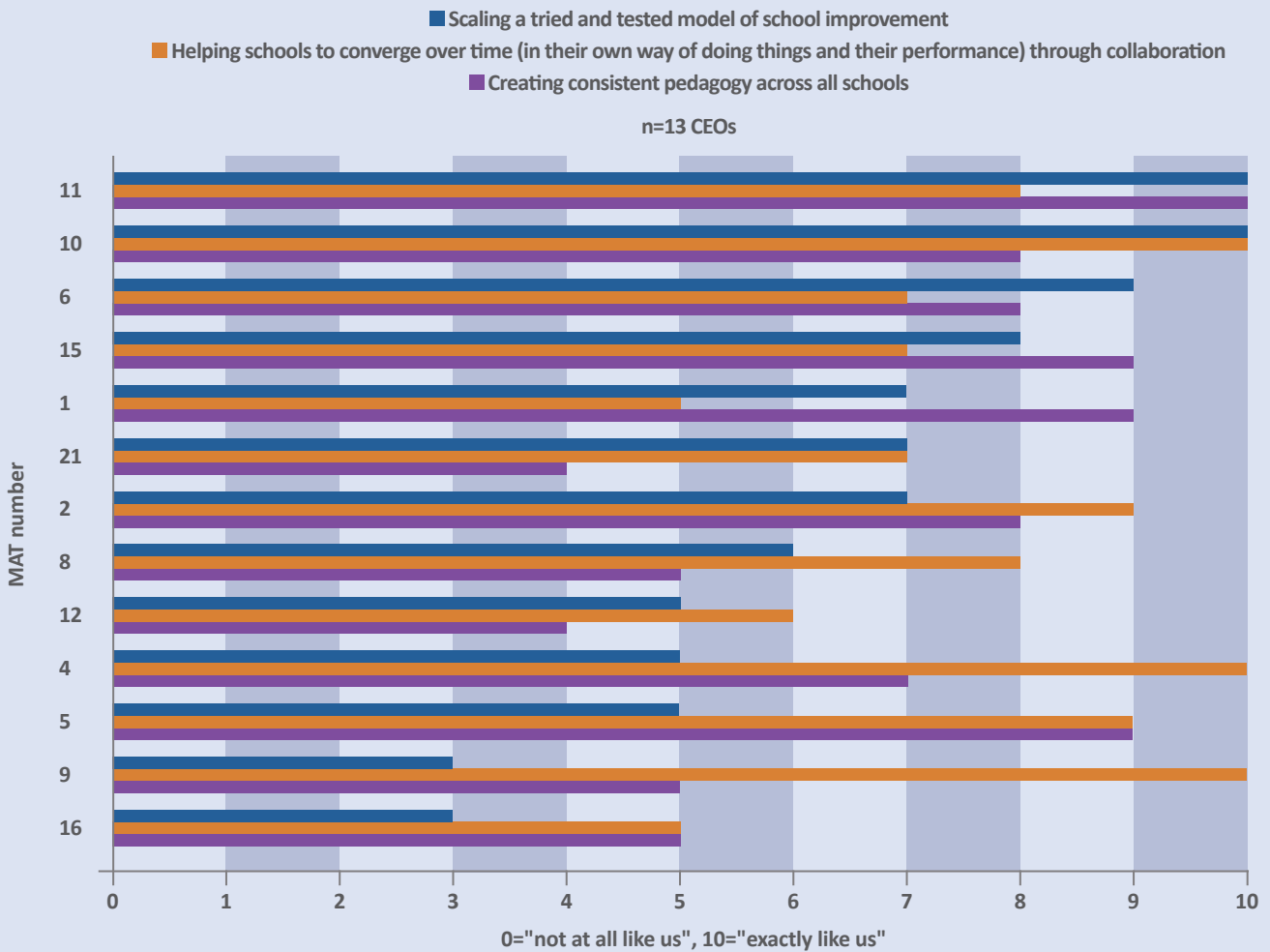
MAT 11 also chose a strategy of scaling and consistency rather than convergence because the CEO wanted to avoid "[multiple] different definitions of 'outstanding'". They also emphasised the opportunities for cost savings and collaboration that arose from having a common approach across schools. The CEO had therefore implemented an operating model that aimed for "70% in common, 30% creative."



We asked CEOs to tell us the extent to which their MAT pursued three different school improvement strategies: scaling a tried and tested model of school improvement; helping schools to converge over time through collaboration, and creating consistent pedagogy across all schools. As shown in **Figure 5**, CEOs reported a range of alignment with each individual strategy. Ordering the data by the extent to which CEOs agreed with ‘scaling a tried and tested model of school improvement’ indicates tentatively that those who were more likely to scale a tried and tested model of school improvement were also more likely to create consistent pedagogy across all schools.

Figure 5: CEOs' scores for three different approaches to school improvement

CEOs report that their MATs adopt a range of approaches to school improvement. There is a tentative indication that those which are more likely to ‘scale a tried and tested model’ are also more likely to ‘create consistent pedagogy’.



It would be a mistake to equate collaborative approaches with hands-off decentralisation, however, since a ‘culture of collaboration’ can be nurtured as part of operating models that centralise MAT functions such as information management, as explored in [section 1.2.1ii](#). The central team can also be responsible for deploying resources from one school to another, thus driving school-to-school collaboration from the centre.



In MAT 4 gradual convergence through collaboration is the aim, rather than scaling a tried and tested model of school improvement (the CEO scored the former ten out of ten and the latter five out of ten). However, it still has a small central improvement team and a structure of meetings across the trust where schools are prioritised according to the level of support they need. Schools are then given individualised support without there being a fixed model of curriculum or pedagogy across the trust. The MAT argues that “school leadership are leaders of the trust” and this means leaders all give and receive help to and from others:

“One of our secondaries has a good system for monitoring progress across schools for discipline of approach which meets Ofsted criteria and all the heads want to do this.”

- MAT 4

Such an approach can have considerable advantages. As MAT 36 put it, “why would I try and hire a curriculum planner and timetabler in each school... why wouldn't we identify our best person and have him or her provide a service into all the schools?” As MAT 4 demonstrates, this identification and deployment can still be facilitated from the centre.



Section 1 conclusion

When developing their visions, MATs need to decide what they want to achieve for pupils and what kind of organisational culture they want to promote. They can then plan how to reach their goals and this gives them their intended strategy. MATs' visions in relation to pupil outcomes can be somewhat generic, for example striving for excellent pupil outcomes and aiming to give pupils the best possible educational opportunities, but often invoke more specific distinctions in relation to prioritisation of academic excellence, a broad range of experiences or exam success – although these emphases are not mutually exclusive. In terms of their desired organisational culture, some MATs aim to be a unified group of schools working as one collegiate entity, while others prioritise schools' ability to retain their individual identities, often in order to maintain strong links with the MAT's local communities.

Once they have decided upon a vision, MATs need to decide how they will deliver their vision. Similar visions can be delivered in different ways depending on MATs' theories of change – in other words, what inputs (or ways of working) they believe result in what outcomes and what they need to do as a MAT to secure these inputs. This involves deciding:

- Whether lifting the burden of administration and back office functions is enough to leave teachers to flourish or whether changes in practice need to be actively implemented.
- Whether a standardised or context-sensitive approach to curriculum and pedagogy will be most effective.
- The extent to which standardised pastoral and behavioural policies are required to secure school improvement.

Once they have decided on their preferred strategy for improving standards, MATs must consider how they will implement their chosen approach. These considerations are underpinned by wider organisational cultures which dictate whether it is better to impose or facilitate change, and whether initiatives should be driven from the bottom or the top. Operational configurations – such as central team structures – must always be considered alongside these questions of wider organisational culture when seeking to understand a MAT's approach to delivering its strategy. For instance, even though MATs tend to have staff at the centre with responsibility for school improvement, some do so in order to facilitate gradual or collaborative convergence, while others drive a set approach from the centre.



2 How robust is our intended strategy in the reality of a changing MAT landscape?

Section 1 showed that MATs' intended strategies are based on their vision and how they think they should go about pursuing them. However, in practice MATs are heavily constrained and there are a number of limitations to what they can do. MATs cannot therefore simply translate an intended strategy into practice. Instead, they have to shape their actual strategy, and set up their operating model based on how they can best navigate the landscape they are facing.

MAT strategies are therefore shaped in response to a range of contextual factors including the requirements made of them, their schools' starting points and current performance, the capacity of their team, the geographical spread of their schools, and what they need to do to acquire and retain new joiners.

Many of these factors are fast-changing. MATs therefore have to constantly adapt their strategies and this can result in a series of 'break points', where the trust has to change its strategy or game plan. These changes are most often related to the MAT's size, but importantly we found this is not the only relevant variable.



Summary

- MATs are subject to a range of contractual, legal and educational obligations and their strategies need to evolve as situation-specific game plans.
- To comply with requirements, MATs often centralise key legal and financial services, as well as back office functions.
- Most CEOs described a stage when it was no longer possible to effectively govern an increasing number of schools with their existing governance structure.
- Schools' current performance had an important effect on MATs' strategic approaches, particularly in relation to school improvement, curriculum and pedagogy and the CEO's role.
- CEOs' strategic decisions are also shaped by what they have the capacity to do, in terms of the trust's financial position and the central team's skills. Limited resources can present both a constraint on growth, and an imperative to grow.
- As MATs grow they are freer to fund central resources. This allows some MATs to move towards employing a central school improvement team.
- CEOs' involvement in day-to-day delivery of core functions differs across MATs, often depending on MAT size and central team capacity.
- Most CEOs explained that as their MAT grew it became impractical for them to take an operational role. CEOs therefore make use of larger central teams to free them up to make strategic decisions.
- Single lead schools or central school improvement teams often struggle to service larger networks of schools and geographic dispersion exacerbates this. MATs therefore often have to switch to peer-to-peer or cluster-based approaches as they grow.
- MATs frequently shift to cluster-based models in response to geographical spread.
- As MATs expand and reach into increasingly different communities, decision are sometimes delegated to head teachers who are seen to have greater knowledge of their community.
- Schools join MATs for different reasons and with varying degrees of enthusiasm. This has to be taken into account since securing buy-in is key. Where schools join hesitantly, under duress or with a strong desire to hold on to their own values and identity, MATs sometimes avoiding centralising or standardising as much as they might do otherwise.



2.1 What do we have to do?

MATs are subject to a range of obligations – whether contractual, legal or educational. Together these constitute the parameters for what MATs’ strategies need to, and can, do.

2.1.1 What do the government, our funding agreement and the Regional Schools Commissioner say we have to do?

Some MATs have clear plans for growth informed by their vision, operating model and practical considerations. However, the Department for Education (DfE) and Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) act as gatekeepers to growth.

In many cases, CEOs reported that government officials oversee a somewhat cyclical relationship between growth, capacity and capability. To justify taking on more schools to the RSC and DfE, CEOs need to prove they have a strong central leadership team and a proven track record. At the same time, increased funding (acquired through growth) can be a prerequisite for growth since it allows MATs to expand their central teams and deliver school improvement. CEOs also argued that their MATs’ growth was sometimes “affected by politics” and relationships with the RSC.

“We've only had one new school this year, and that's not been for want of trying through the Regional Schools Commissioner but [they have] not approved any new schools until we get the Diocesan strategy set up a little bit better and we get more of a track record of school improvement, so that all limits your business plan as to what you can do.”

- MAT 15

Other MATs (such as MAT 35) have grown in response to the Department for Education or RSC asking them to take on academies in need of school improvement. As one CEO explained:

“We were an approved sponsor, so we were approached by the DfE to take on [a school]... They were in special measures; they needed help.”

- MAT 23

However, a lack of funding can make it hard to take on schools:

“Say I've been offered a primary project and the DfE gives me £100k. The project stands with £2m of deficit, so I've said no... that means you end up with a range of untouchable projects.”

- MAT 44

Thus, a growth strategy can be limited (or accelerated) by external factors, forcing MATs to adapt their strategy. They will therefore pursue a different strategy depending on their RSC’s or the DfE’s priorities and approach at the time.



2.1.2 What do we need to do to ensure we are meeting our obligations?

In order to ensure they are compliant with requirements, MATs often centralise key legal and financial services within their operating model. For instance, one CEO explained that sharing certain services made it easier to adhere to legal responsibilities in relation to HR procedures and financial reporting.

Similarly, a Cluster 2 MAT CEO described centralisation as a response to the need to “shore up... a whole range of risks around everything else we do” including safeguarding and health and safety.

Having a mixed-phase, primary and secondary MAT can add complexity to back office functions such as data management since different tracking systems are needed, forcing MATs to invest more in central functions. If they cannot afford such systems, they have little choice but to pursue a more ‘hands-off’ strategy. This may lead to an operating model that involves less monitoring and less centralised data systems.

Thus the nature of the schools within a MAT and the resources available combine to make different strategies optimal and this has important implications for MATs’ operating models.

Break point: maintaining compliance as MATs grow

As the sums of money, value of estates and ‘number of lives’ entrusted to a MAT increase, trusts frequently need to establish more robust central systems, processes and governance. As one CEO explained:

“You get to a point where you’re responsible for what is often many millions and millions of pounds worth of estate and people’s lives. All of a sudden you’re in a corporate responsibility environment that you really do need to understand.”

- MAT 9 (cluster 2)

Increasing scale can mean that monitoring compliance by individual schools becomes impractical and providing services centrally becomes more efficient. For example, as one MAT explained

“Originally everybody had their own websites, doing it their own way. We spent ages trying to track who met the DfE criteria for having everything that they should have on their website. In the end, we decided ‘actually we’re going to go with one website provider, we’re going to have all the same tabs for all schools, they’re going to file their stuff in the same places’, and that makes it just so much easier.”

- MAT 33

MATs can also find that in order to fulfil governance functions, or report to external agencies, trustees need access to enhanced data. This can result in a break point in relation to information management and administration:

“We went to centralised HR administrators because we were dealing with so many inconsistencies in policy and practice, and numbers of HR issues, that we had to effectively manage it.”

- MAT 34



2.1.3 What sort of governance do we need?

Overseeing larger networks of schools places considerable demands on governance, and traditional governing bodies of local volunteers are not always sufficient to meet this. As MATs grow in size, their governance structures therefore often have to adapt. This can involve a shift to multi-tiered governance structures with decisions taken at different levels, or to greater co-ordination across local governing bodies. In one MAT, for example, common formats for agendas and minutes were introduced across all local governing boards to make oversight easier.

“How do you monitor across seven different schools? What kinds of mechanisms are there for that? What might you expect to see on an agenda for a local governing body that’s part of a MAT and how would the trustees get involved at local governing body level?”

- MAT 27

However, for some MATs the need to secure adequate oversight has to be balanced against a commitment to autonomy, and local or community-based decision-making, as explored in [section 1.2.1ii](#).

Break point: ensuring governance structures and schemes of delegation are fit for purpose

An increasing number of schools can be difficult to govern with legacy governance structures better suited to smaller networks. As discussed above, MAT 27 therefore felt that once it had reached five schools, highly delegated local governing bodies and a representative model became impractical. More centralisation was therefore deemed necessary.

As they grow, MATs have to adapt and evolve their decision-making frameworks and schemes of delegation in order to accommodate an increasing number of voices, as the CEO of MAT 39 explains in relation to their MAT’s shift from two schools to seven:

“It moves from being a conversation between two people to being a decision involving a large group of quite strong-willed head teachers... the decision-making framework, the schemes of delegation, the discussions that sit behind how we are going to do things are really, really significant in terms of getting consensus about how we are going to move forward even if not everyone thinks it is the right way to move forward.”

- MAT 39

As trusts grow further, things may need to change once again. For example when MAT 34 grew to encompass 13 schools it established a new, four-tier structure:

“The fourth tier is school advisory boards, the third tier is cluster governing bodies, the second tier is Board sub-committees, and then a Board, each of which have got clear lines and schemes of delegation.”

- MAT 34



2.2 What do we need to do given our schools' current performance?

The performance profile of a trust's schools has an important effect on a MAT's strategy, particularly in relation to school improvement, curriculum and pedagogy and the CEO's role.

While some CEOs would prefer to drive school improvement through school-to-school collaboration rather than scaling a tried and tested model (see [Figure 5](#)) this relies on having sufficient capacity and expertise within the network of schools and, in particular, amongst school leaders.

Centralisation of curricula and pedagogy is therefore sometimes seen as a necessary response to schools with flagging performance, particularly where more autonomous models have failed to yield improvements. Indeed, even MATs with less centralised curriculum models often expect further centralisation to occur if schools struggle to secure acceptable outcomes. The CEO of MAT 38 typified this approach, explaining how they "actively encourage schools to be autonomous and successful", but that is only as long as "the outcomes are okay."

Conversely, while MAT 26 had initially centralised its curriculum to bring schools out of special measures, they found that they needed to change approach by handing autonomy back to schools once they reached a higher threshold of performance. As the CEO put it, it was "as if there was a glass ceiling under a more centralised model".

Poor school performance also has implications for how CEOs perform their own role, requiring them to step in and drive improvement, even if this is not what they initially intended to do. While a MAT's intended strategy might therefore be one of high levels of school autonomy, this strategy sometimes has to pivot unexpectedly and become more interventionist in response to challenges. This can result in changes to the operating model, particularly in relation to the CEO's role.

This was clearly the case in MAT 39, a small trust with fewer than ten schools but from a mix of phases. When the MAT was small the CEO was highly involved in schools' day-to-day life, but growth had precipitated a change in approach, with less involvement in daily affairs and more involvement in structural decisions and leadership across schools. This change was not simply a consequence of scale; it was partly a response to the fact that two of the schools required significant improvement. As the CEO explained, circumstances led them to become involved in areas "they would never have wanted to."

"When we started I was in effect head of both the secondary schools and I was very hands on in many ways. I was known to all the kids and I was really involved in stuff... (but) I can't be with nine schools, especially with two of them in special measures... because of the financial situation I have had to become very involved in restructure and things that I would never have wanted to do, you know... They require a massive amount of kind of moral leadership as well as decision-making ... managing all of that... I think there are things that because of my background from being a head teacher that I am not as strong in some areas as a CEO would be who came from a non-teaching background. But that would lead to leadership of a different kind."

- MAT 39



2.3 What do we have the capacity to do?

Regardless of what they want and need to do, MATs are also limited by what they can do given the available financial and human resources. They therefore have to develop a strategy that makes the most of their capacity.

2.3.1 What can we afford to do?

MATs cannot directly translate an intended approach into practice without the necessary financial resources and CEO interviews made it clear that decisions were taken in the context of what was affordable. This could be seen in approaches to school improvement: while many CEOs want to establish a centralised school improvement team they cannot always afford to do so initially. They therefore often rely more on school-to-school support (where they have the capacity and expertise in schools) or freelance consultants.

Alternatively, the need to secure more financial resources in order to conduct operations in a MAT's preferred way can push a MAT to want to grow. Necessity can therefore indirectly drive a MAT's growth strategy.

As MATs grow, the potential savings from economies of scale become more important. One MAT with over 20 schools took on a procurement officer which was "not something that started initially, it needed scale". As the CEO explained, "in the past, if I had an extra £30,000, you'd just think 'hire another teacher'." Given their scale, they recently bought into a major recruitment service which costs £150,000 a year but means recruitment is now 'free'. Their teacher recruitment strategy had therefore changed in response to available resources, and their operating model consequently shifted to draw on external capacity.

However, MATs working predominantly or solely with primary schools can struggle to leverage economies of scale because they do not gain a substantial increase in central funding when they take on a new school. MAT 35 therefore set a desired ratio of secondary to primary schools within its network. Thus it shaped its growth strategy in response to financial considerations.

"We already said from the beginning that if it were the complete portfolio... it should be roughly two thirds secondary, one third primary...The reason for that is a financial one."

- MAT 35



Break point: balancing growth and capacity

As MATs grow they can secure more resources for their central team. This allows MATs to move towards employing a central school improvement team if they so wish.

“So, we’ve gone from outsourcing to then employing our own people when we could finally afford it.”

- MAT 35

In turn, consolidating back office functions and building the central team can act as a break point in itself by providing the capacity for further growth. A MAT’s growth strategy can therefore change in response to increased operational capacity.

“We reached a tipping point where we have been able to heavily invest in our infrastructure, our central team... This has meant we have been able to take on a group of schools in [one county] which has been a big development for our trust – moving into a new geographical area.”

- MAT 2, (cluster 1)

2.3.2 What skills do we have at our disposal?

MATs have to assess whether or not they have the right people in place in order to operate in particular ways and at different scales. They therefore have to reflect on their existing skill sets and make adjustments to structures and staffing in response. Given this, a lack of capacity combined with a lack of funds can force a MAT to pursue an approach that does not reflect its ideal strategy, until their capacity changes and they can begin pursuing their ideal strategy.

MAT 39, for example, is currently forced to rely on external consultants for support, despite the fact that they would prefer to move to a school-to-school approach in the future.

“Currently we are having to buy in additional support. And we do that at trust level to support each school but we have just been designated as a teaching school so we think in a year’s time we will be brokering that support through the Teaching School Alliance rather than having to do that in a ‘buying in an external’ way... so for example pupil premium in secondary I have got one consultant who is coming in and working with all secondaries to make sure there is a consistent way we are doing that. I mean one of our issues is that we don’t have much money.”

- MAT 39



2.3.3 What can, and should, our leaders do?

CEOs play very different roles in MATs' operating models depending on their skill set and circumstances. As well as adapting their role in response to the performance profile of their trust's schools (as discussed in [section 2.2](#)) CEOs' involvement in the day-to-day delivery of core functions varies depending on MAT size and the capacity of the central team that surrounds them. In MATs with small central teams (though not exclusively) CEOs often take an active, day-to-day role in functions such as school improvement and monitoring data.

On the other hand, where CEOs do not have a background in education, like in MAT 36, the CEO may be less involved in the 'nuts and bolts' of curriculum, pedagogy and school improvement. Instead they may commission consultants, recruit additional educational experts into the central team or bring experienced head teachers from individual academies into the central team so that they can lead in specific areas. Furthermore, the mix of schools within the MAT can also place differing demands on capacity and require different expertise. Particularly pertinent factors here include the mix of educational phases and the MAT's geographical spread. This was emphasised by MAT 24 which had acquired an additional four primary schools and was therefore recruiting more primary specialists to its central team and establishing a series of school clusters.

Finally, MATs also shape their central team (and the areas it focuses on) in response to sector-level trends. For instance, CEOs of some MATs such as MAT 25 described centralising staff development and retention in response to current recruitment challenges.



Break points in the CEO's role

Most CEOs explained that as their MAT grew, it was impractical for them to retain an operational role – in particular a 'hands-on' approach to school improvement. As the CEO of a small MAT explained:

"You get to a tipping point whereby if the other schools in our area do come on board... at what point do I put a head of school into this school I am in now, my upper school, to run that on a daily basis and I kind of move to a different level?... I am quite hands on in many ways, I quite enjoy that, (being)... with the students and setting the culture. But actually, there is another role there."

- MAT 43

As one MAT with 13 schools explained, further down the line, additional growth and new appointments can lead to another shift in what CEOs do, this time within the central team:

"As we grow in the next three or four schools, I suspect I'm going to have to step away from [being involved in school improvement] and have a head of education, for example, to allow that to happen."

- MAT 34

Similarly, MAT 36 argued that once MATs grew beyond a certain point, CEOs could no longer get involved in 'school recruitment' and that once they acquired 10-15 schools they had to shift their role to being a 'director and enabler' instead of a doer. As the CEO of MAT 42 explained, this might involve working less closely with individual heads once the MAT had nine or ten schools.

In order to allow a shift in a CEOs' role, a larger central team may be needed to free up the CEO's capacity to make decisions and to make space for an enhanced external role.

"We're now in a situation where I don't have to do the HR. So I suppose the journey of the last five years would be looking from starting off being super hands-on, super operational, while carrying a strategic vision as I went, to someone who is now much more outward-facing."

- MAT 23



2.3.4 How can we deliver the necessary school improvement support?

Some MATs initially develop around an outstanding hub school. This school drives improvement amongst its partner schools. However individual schools have limited capacity and additional central capacity, or a broader network of peer-to-peer support, can therefore be required if they are to continue driving forward their vision of school improvement. This might involve heads, subject directors and middle leaders being deployed across the trust. This results in a considerable shift in strategy and a need for a different operational model, not necessarily due to a change in intention, but due to necessity.

Thus, regardless of the MAT's preferred approach to school improvement (explored in [section 1.2](#)) scale can result in a shift in approach. Similarly, even where a MAT wants to pursue a peer-to-peer approach this can only happen when there is a critical mass of good practice. MATs' approaches to school improvement therefore have to be flexible and responsive to current capacity and demands.

Break point: delivering school improvement as MATs grow or become geographically dispersed

Single lead schools or central school improvement teams often struggle to service larger networks of schools. However this is not solely determined by size, since geographic dispersion exacerbates difficulties. MATs therefore often have to switch to peer-to-peer or cluster-based approaches as they grow, in some cases to ensure they make the most of the school leaders at their disposal. This can be harder to achieve where the schools in a particular location lack the capacity or expertise to support others' improvement. Thus size, geography, human resources and current expertise all play a role in shaping the ways in which MATs pursue their school improvement strategy.

"The danger is that trusts don't move out of this [single, centralised] model and there is one partner seen to be the driving force and support is localised in this one partner."

- MAT 2 (cluster 1)

Cluster-based models and expanded central teams become particularly important once CEOs can no longer maintain a day-to-day presence across all their schools, since a CEO-driven model has considerable drawbacks in terms scalability.



Models of school improvement can therefore be summarised as follows:

1. Hub model

- A high performing school or leader drives improvement and supports others. This expertise is often sent out to a cluster of schools to help them improve.
- This approach is often adopted when a MAT has grown organically from an initial high performing school.

2. Centralised consultants

- The MAT employs consultants who can support schools in the network. These are often ex-heads.
- This approach is often adopted when networks grow and hub models become difficult to sustain or greater expertise is needed.

3. In-house central expertise

- The MAT employs a dedicated school improvement lead or team. In many cases this is a member of the core senior leadership team. In some MATs this in-house team is large (over ten individuals). In some cases this expertise is drawn from the best leaders in model 1.
- This shift often happens once MATs can afford it, when they can direct resources from stronger to weaker schools, and when they become dissatisfied with consultants.

4. Cluster-based model

- Distinct geographic hubs are established with school improvement activity taking place across sub-networks of schools, perhaps led by a regional training school.
- This approach is often a response to further expansion and/or geographic dispersion.

5. Self-improving network

- MATs share expertise and use peer-to-peer support to deliver school improvement where needed. This can be directed from the centre in response to underperformance/identified areas for improvement, or in a more collaborative and less directed way.
- This approach tends to be adopted (or be an aspiration) once a critical mass of good practice is achieved.



2.4 How can we operate given our geographical spread?

As we saw above, MATs frequently shift to cluster-based models in response to geographical spread – as the CEO of the community-focused MAT 40 (see 1.1.2) highlighted:

“[I am not] physically able to get round and visit schools as frequently as I could do when I first started... [Clusters mean] teachers can get to another school to either watch or observe or perhaps be doing some teaching in another person’s school but within a reasonable geographic distance.”

- MAT 40

As we saw in section 1.2, many MATs also believe they need to take different approaches in different areas in order to adapt their curriculum to different communities’ needs. Geographical dispersion can therefore accentuate the need for heterogeneity of curriculum. For example, given the CEO of MAT 2’s belief that “it isn’t appropriate to have the same curriculum in different regions... different schools have different backgrounds”, the degree of curriculum diversity within a MAT might differ depending on whether its schools are nationally dispersed or regionally focused.

This justification was echoed by the CEO of MAT 13, one of only two Cluster 3 MATs that stand out for their focus on community, when they explained that “each school serves a distinct community so needs some autonomy. No standardised uniform or curriculum or mantras.”

Break point: maintaining local decision-making as MATs become more dispersed

As MATs expand and reach into increasingly different communities, some respond by delegating decision-making to head teachers who are expected to have a strong identification with their own community.

For MAT 29, a wider geographical spread and increased scale led to the MAT regionalising its back-office functions. This decision was premised on the need to free heads up to spend more time delivering curriculum improvements, while responding to regional logistics.



2.5 What do we need to do to acquire schools and keep them on board?

Schools join MATs for different reasons and with different degrees of enthusiasm. While some actively choose to join a MAT, others simply feel it is the best available option in the face of local authority retrenchment or consider it the inevitable direction of travel within the system. Finally, some schools join MATs due to a forced conversion. MATs have to take these different school 'biographies' into account.

Where schools join hesitantly, under duress or with a strong desire to hold on to their own values and identity, it can be important to carefully gain buy-in by managing schools' expectations of the degree of autonomy they will be able to exercise once part of the MAT. This may play a role in cluster 1 and 3's rationale for prioritising autonomy. On the other hand, as we saw in [section 1.2.2](#) this can lead some MATs to promise autonomy in a bid to attract schools and "be all things to all people" (MAT 27), an approach that can become problematic over time.

In contrast, schools come to some MATs based on the trust's existing track record and established way of doing things. One CEO therefore explained that they seek to work with schools who will embrace their principles and contribute to collaborative working.

"It is very important the schools approached us; we didn't go looking for them. We only want to work with people who want to work with us and who share our values and our principles. And actually those who have the maturity who want to be genuine players in the collaborative partnership."

- MAT 42



The weak links between MAT performance and strategy

As we have seen, MATs' intended strategies are shaped by their vision, what they believe the most effective way of improving standards is, how they want to deliver school improvement, and what options they have available based on their circumstances. Given these myriad factors driving innumerable compromises, and the difficulties of meaningfully assessing MAT performance, it is perhaps unsurprising that we found no link between a MAT's cluster and its performance profile. However, we did observe some tentative links in relation to certain specific features of MATs' strategies and operations.

Firstly, higher-performing trusts appeared to be more likely to explicitly cite standards and outcomes when defining their overall vision while lower-performing trusts were more likely to state their vision in broader terms. For instance, a CEO of a higher-performing MAT stated:

“First of all, all of them would know that there's a relentless pursuit of improvement in teaching and learning. Because that would underpin absolutely everything that we do.”

- MAT 23

Another explained that:

“Our main purpose, if you like, is to secure really high standards in all the schools that we work with and we focus on developing and sustaining outstanding leadership with a view to raising outcomes for children and young people.”

- MAT 40

Meanwhile, CEOs of lower-performing trust described their values in vaguer terms, such as “centred around improving life chances... we seek to do that by improving outcomes” and “focused towards delivering a world-class education.”

Secondly, our interview analysis suggested that higher-performing MATs appeared to be more likely to use more centralised approaches to leadership and management. For instance, one CEO of a higher-performing MAT with a highly centralised approach to leadership and management explained:

“We can't have a school being able to make a decision that could have an impact on that school without us having any... without [going] past [the] central team.”

- MAT 40

Meanwhile, a CEO of a lower-performing MAT explained they did not establish a common curriculum or uniform or ‘mantra’ because they want their schools to be responsive to their local communities and do not want them to be ‘factories’.



Despite some tentative evidence that MATs and their CEOs adopted different strategies, and that these sometimes appeared to be associated with a trust’s performance, in general our analysis identified no clear association between MATs’ strategies and their performance, nor any clear accounts of causality between the two. This is unsurprising given the limitations of our measures, both of MAT strategies, which are based on self-report, and of performance, which is hard to measure and classify across a group of schools. As we have shown, different strategies are more or less viable in different circumstances. Furthermore, the same strategy can be executed well or poorly in different instances, and this may have as much if not more impact on a MAT’s performance than the strategy itself. This is the underlying premise of ‘coherence’: it is the extent to which a strategy suits a MAT’s context, and the extent to which the strategy and capabilities of the MAT align, which will likely determine performance.

Distribution of MAT performance by strategic cluster: there is no clear correlation between strategic choices and level of performance



Section 2 conclusion

Intended strategies do not automatically translate into actual strategies. MATs therefore need to consider what is possible given their context in order to select the optimal 'game plan'. This involves:

- **Working within the parameters set by the Department for Education and the Regional Schools Commissioner.** These government officials are gatekeepers for growth.
- **Meeting obligations.** MATs often decide to centralise legal and financial services or invest more in back office functions in order to meet requirements.
- **Adapting governance structures in light of the MAT's context.** MATs frequently reform their governance structures as their scale changes, sometimes posing a challenge for MATs with a strong community focus.
- **Responding to schools' current performance.** Centralised curriculum and pedagogy models, and the CEO taking a 'hands-on' approach, are sometimes seen as a way of tackling underperformance. However, less centralised approaches are sometimes deemed necessary to give schools space to improve once they have reached a certain standard.
- **Having the necessary financial resources.** Some MATs do not have the financial freedom to build the central team they want and to grow. However, pressure to secure more funding can also push MATs to grow. Once MATs grow, they often find that it is possible to make savings through economies of scale.
- **The central team's capacity and capability.** CEOs surrounded by small central teams often take a more 'hands on' leadership approach. However, where CEOs do not have a background in education they may delegate leading the curriculum, pedagogy and school improvement to members of the central team with educational expertise.
- **The MAT's capacity for delivering school improvement.** Peer-to-peer support can be difficult where there is a dearth of good practice within a MAT. Therefore, MATs' approaches to school improvement often depend on current capacity.
- **The MAT's geographical spread. MATs often adapt their structure based on their geographical spread.** Schools that are far from each other can find it harder to collaborate and the core team can find itself at a considerable distance. Meanwhile some MATs find that geographical spread results in individual schools needing to respond to each community's unique needs. This can necessitate a shift in curriculum design and delivery.
- **Acquiring new schools and keeping them on board.** Some MATs find that where schools are strongly attached to their own values, they have to avoid standardising as much as they might otherwise choose to do.



3 What plans do we have for the future?

We have illustrated how MATs' strategic approaches are framed by their vision and aims, shaped by contextual factors, and adopted with varying degrees of consistency by the members of their central teams. MATs' strategies are also shaped by their future plans, which are shaped in turn by a range of factors including their assessment of their current performance and effectiveness, their understanding of the relationship between developing central capacity and taking on new schools, and their desire to achieve a particular degree of geographical focus or dispersion.

Summary

- Parent and community engagement was the area in which MATs appeared to rate their effectiveness least highly, while the area that most set MATs apart in terms of their self-assessed effectiveness was performance of back office services
- Some MATs had a greater degree of consensus in relation to their self-assessed effectiveness than others
- In general, MATs voiced little enthusiasm for changing the degree of standardisation of different operating areas though respondents tended to err on the side of further standardisation, particularly in relation to:
 - Information management
 - Back office services
 - Development of senior school staff
- There was slightly more desire to standardise curriculum, school improvement and information management amongst central teams, and slightly more desire for further standardisation of senior staff development amongst local teams
- MATs' future growth plans tend to be expressed in terms of reaching a specific number of schools or pupils, or developing a hub or cluster model
- MATs also couch their growth plans in terms of moving into new localities or regions, taking on particular phases or types of school, or merging with other MATs, although these priorities appear to be less prevalent



3.1 How effective do we think we are?

Our survey asked MATs to rate their effectiveness across different areas of operation, which gives an indication of where they might seek improvements over time. MATs' median self-assessed effectiveness scores averaged six or seven out of ten in almost all MATs, with only two MATs averaging a median self-assessment of five or less, and none scoring an average higher than seven.

The area that most set MATs apart in terms of their self-assessed effectiveness was performance of back office services, while parent and community engagement was the area in which effectiveness was rated least highly, which may reflect the extent to which many MATs left this to schools to determine.

Some MATs had a greater degree of consensus in relation to their self-assessed effectiveness than others. While most MATs' average interquartile range of self-assessed effectiveness across the different operating areas was around three, several had an IQ range of four and one had an IQ range of five. This suggested that in some MATs there is a need to address divergent views of effectiveness.

3.2 Where would we like to standardise further?

There was little enthusiasm for making large changes to existing approaches, but where there was a desire for change respondents tended to err on the side of further standardisation. In fact, there was no area where MATs on average wanted to see less standardised operations.

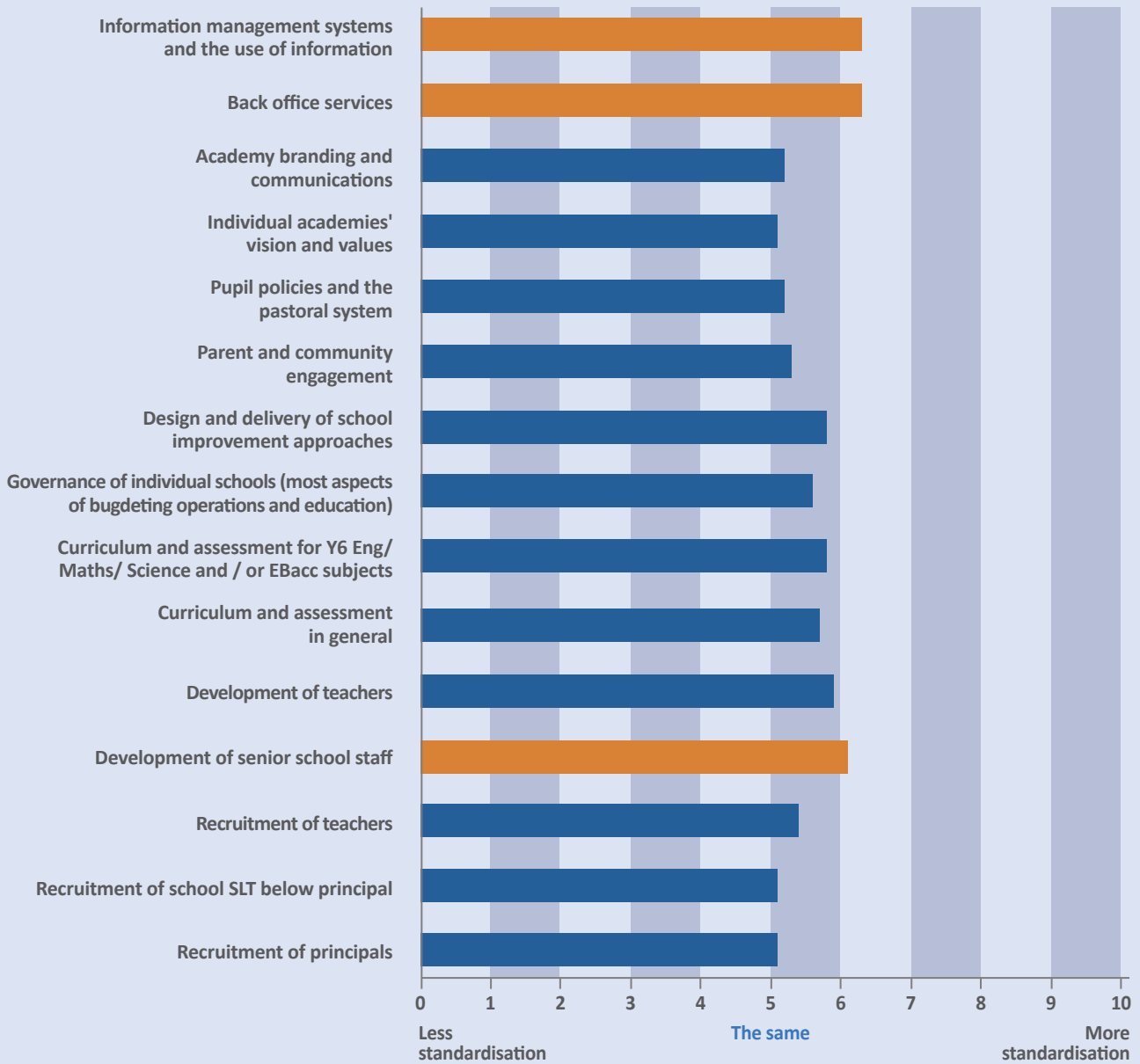
Areas where MATs were particularly keen to standardise more were information management, back office services and development of senior school staff (see [Figure 6](#)). The range of responses within each MAT was also small and comparing responses from local and central teams did not generally reveal large discrepancies. However, there was slightly more desire to standardise curriculum, school improvement and information management amongst central teams, and slightly more desire for further standardisation of senior staff development amongst 'local' teams.

Even in relation to those operating model areas where CEOs tended to favour further standardisation, there was often a sense that this could be a long-term process. Moreover, CEOs did not necessarily cohere around a distinct set of priorities within operational areas, even when they did tend towards standardisation. For instance, no clear trends were apparent regarding the priority with which MATs standardised different aspects of information management. Some standardised finance systems before pupil data systems while others prioritised a common system for school performance data over other systems. Context mattered here: for instance, some MATs with secondary and primary schools appeared to take longer to establish common performance data tracking systems.



Figure 6: Average (median) responses: Do you think schools in your MAT would benefit from more or less standardisation across the MAT in the following areas?

In the majority of operational areas, MAT staff report they would like about the same level of standardisation as they experience now. However, there is demand for greater standardisation of information management systems and use of information, back office services, and development of senior school staff.



We recognise that MATs with a higher number of responses may have disproportionately skewed averages. We therefore created a 'balanced sample' of four randomly selected responses from each of our 17 MATs with five or more responses. This yielded results consistent with those above but with slightly higher levels of enthusiasm for further centralisation.



3.3 How do we plan to grow?

MATs' future growth plans tend to be expressed in terms of reaching a specific number of schools or pupils. Growing the number of schools within a trust is generally seen as crucial to developing sufficient central capacity and becoming financially sustainable, although some CEOs voiced a reluctance to grow until central capacity was already in place, as we discuss in [section 2.3.1](#). Plans to take on additional schools tend to go hand in hand with plans to form hubs or clusters, often as a means of devolving school improvement from the centre to a sub-network of schools, as we discuss in [section 2.3.4](#). In addition to taking on new schools, many MATs also couch their growth plans in terms of moving into new localities or regions, taking on particular phases or types of school, or merging with other MATs, although these priorities appear to be less prevalent. Ultimately, MATs' growth plans are continually reframed as they develop their capacity, take on new schools with different needs, and respond to the priorities and imperatives of the system around them.

i) Aim for a specific number of schools or pupils

Growing to 15 schools represents a particular milestone for many MATs, who report that this is the first stage at which financial sustainability can be achieved. Some MATs see growing to 15 schools as a 'pause point' before embarking on further growth:

“In this current phase of growth, and we need to get to that 14 or 15 to be able to meet all our costs and to be efficient, and then I think we just need to stabilise at that size and make that work for us. Then, maybe in five or six years' time, somebody else might come along and say, ‘Right, we're in a good and strong position now to take another five or six on.’”

- MAT 32

Meanwhile, other MATs see numerical targets – such as reaching a specific number of schools – as an end point for their MAT's growth. This is normally justified in terms of retaining a local identity or for all of the schools in the MAT to have strong collaborative links with one another:

“There is a big part of me that believes we will not go beyond 15 or 16 schools because we will lose that magic, that intimacy and that devotion to partnership, which has caused us to do really exciting things.”

- MAT 30

The process of growing to a sustainable size tends to be seen in two ways. Some MATs aim to 'build capacity before growth', for instance by expanding the central team before recruiting further schools:

“A big part of our belief system is developing an infrastructure for our next phase of development. We are always looking at how we can have a structure that will take us to the next stage rather than matching it to where we are at the moment.”

- MAT 2



Meanwhile, a larger number of MATs appear to feel that growth supports central capacity, and for some MATs the onus to grow overrides their desire to be selective about the schools they recruit:

“We have got to get to a point where we are viable and we can sustain the people who are employed centrally... we’ll have two schools that are struggling because that is the only way we will be able to grow and do the things we want to do.”

- MAT 41

ii) Develop clusters or hubs

Many MATs express their future growth plans in terms of forming, or expanding, clusters or hubs of schools:

“We are sustainable now without growing, but obviously the larger we get we want to move into hubs. If we’re getting larger we’ve actually got a model for five localised hubs and that will enable more sharing in terms of having business experts in a particular area in each hub and school improvement peer-to-peer monitoring.”

- MAT 25

As well as providing organisational efficiencies, MATs’ plans to develop hubs are often driven by a desire to build on the local links between their existing schools, rather than spreading the MAT too thinly:

“We will only grow in clusters around schools we’ve already got, and not take on any more schools that are in other isolated locations, because that would be absolutely pointless. Future schools will be in clusters and that will help us to strengthen... those collaborative hubs.”

- MAT 42

A small minority of MATs see their future growth potentially involving a merger with one or more trusts, and sharing central functions across MATs, although these plans tend to be tentative.

iii) Continually redefining growth plans

Looking across the interviews, MATs tend not to have set ‘blueprints’ for growth. Although some MATs do have long-term targets for size or structure, primarily in order to reach a point of financial sustainability, many MATs explain how their future growth strategies necessarily shift with every new school they take on, and with every change to their resourcing and expertise that these new recruits bring with them.

As one CEO explains:

“When you get to seven, as we are now... let’s imagine this eighth one is going to join us. Right, what does the central plan look like from September 2018? And it will look different again.”

- MAT 31

Likewise, and as we discuss in [section 2.1.1](#), MATs also acknowledge that growth plans are necessarily shaped by the priorities of their RSC, Diocese, local authority and the Department for Education.



Section 3 conclusion

Sections 1 and 2 considered how MATs' strategic approaches are framed by their vision and aims, shaped by their theories of change and contextual factors, and adopted with varying degrees of consistency by the members of their central teams. This final section of the report considered how MATs' strategies are also shaped by their future plans, and how these plans are in turn shaped by a range of considerations including:

- MATs' assessments of their current effectiveness
- The consistency with which these assessments are made within central teams
- The areas of MATs' operations they intend to standardise further
- Their understanding of the relationship between additional capacity and further growth
- Their desire to achieve a particular degree of geographical focus or dispersion
- The extent to which they plan to develop a hub or cluster model in order to devolve their school improvement function
- The priorities and demands of the system around them, including Regional Schools Commissioners, local authorities and the Department for Education

Our findings suggest that most MATs tend to rate their effectiveness more highly in terms of their delivery of back office services and less highly in relation to parent and community engagement. Most MAT central teams appeared to have a relatively cohesive sense of their effectiveness in different areas, although some MATs displayed more internal variation than others. Information management, back office services and development of senior school staff appear to be areas where MATs are particularly keen to standardise more in the future.

MATs' future growth plans tend to be expressed in terms of reaching a specific number of schools or pupils, or developing a hub or cluster model. MATs also couch their growth plans in terms of moving into new localities or regions, taking on particular phases or types of school, or merging with other MATs, although these priorities appear to be less prevalent. The distinction between growing in order to increase central capacity, and increasing central capacity in order to support further growth, appears to be a key way of differentiating trusts, with most MATs seeing growth as a prerequisite for further expansion.



4 Summary and conclusions

We have illustrated how MATs' strategic approaches are framed by their vision and aims, shaped by contextual factors, and adopted with varying degrees of consistency by the members of their central teams. MATs' strategies are also shaped by their future plans, which are shaped in turn by a range of factors including their assessment of their current performance and effectiveness, their understanding of the relationship between developing central capacity and taking on new schools, and their desire to achieve a particular degree of geographical focus or dispersion.

This research builds on the existing evidence base on MAT types, growth and effectiveness by exploring the different ways MATs operate and how operational decisions can be linked to MATs' aims and visions, the strategies they pursue in order to realise these aims, and how these strategies respond to the constraints that exist in a changing MAT landscape. Along the way we demonstrate how, although MATs' aims share many common features, they exhibit wide diversity in the strategic approaches they adopt, which in turn reflect different assumptions about the best way to achieve particular outcomes for pupils and to foster a particular organisational culture. Exploring how MATs have grown, and intend to grow in the future, offers valuable insights into these interrelationships between aims, strategy, operations and context.

During the course of the report we put forward a nuanced framework for interpreting MATs' strategies and operations. We show that MATs with similar structures, such as a central school improvement team, can use those structures to support different approaches to improving pupil outcomes, and to serve different organisational cultures. MATs can use central capacity to either drive forward standardised approaches or oversee a process of collaborative convergence. In addition, strategies may shift over time, with more or less standardised approaches suiting different phases of growth. Furthermore, MATs vary in the extent to which their central teams share a consistent set of strategic priorities, and although most MATs share similar aims to grow, these rest on different motivations and can be pursued via divergent routes.

Together, these observations make the case for avoiding defining MATs in terms of their aims, strategy or operations alone, or for using terms such as 'centralised' and 'standardised' as MAT-level descriptors rather than to describe specific features of their strategy or operations. Our findings also demonstrate that there is no single route to MAT growth, and no single response to the break points that trusts will encounter along the way. To that end, we structure our report as a series of 'key questions' every MAT should ask itself in order to better understand the links between its vision, strategy, operations and future plans.



What is our vision and our intended strategy?

In **section 1** we show that when they are developing their visions, MATs need to decide what they want to achieve for pupils and what kind of organisational culture they want to promote. They can then plan how to reach their goals and this gives them their intended strategy. MATs' visions in relation to pupil outcomes tend to prioritise a combination of academic excellence, a broad range of experiences or exam success. In terms of their desired organisational culture, some MATs aim to be a unified group of schools working as one collegiate entity, while others prioritise schools' ability to retain their individual identities, often in order to maintain strong links with the MAT's local communities.

Once they have decided upon a vision, MATs need to decide how they will deliver it. Similar visions can be delivered in different ways depending on MATs' theories of change. This involves deciding:

- Whether lifting the burden of administration and back office functions is enough to leave teachers to flourish or whether changes in practice need to be actively implemented
- Whether a standardised or context-sensitive approach to curriculum and pedagogy will be most effective
- The extent to which standardised pastoral and behavioural policies are required to secure school improvement

Survey data from 17 MATs shows that most MATs consider “setting a common vision and culture while maintaining local autonomy in delivery” and “ensuring each school works to strengthen its community” to be very important in absolute terms, although cluster analysis shows there is still variation in just how important MATs consider these aims to be relative to one another. Most trusts also see a role for themselves in generating efficiencies and freeing up school resources to allow greater focus on teaching and learning. In contrast, MATs differ considerably in terms of whether they seek to “protect each school's individual identity” and “create consistent pedagogy across all schools.”

Cluster analysis identified three main groups of MATs in terms of their preferred strategies. These clusters revealed that when MATs focus their strategy on autonomy and identity they appear to focus less on achieving consistent teaching and pedagogy, and vice versa. A focus on teaching and pedagogy rather than autonomy and individual schools' identities tends to be linked to conducting key functions in a more centralised way.

Once they have decided on their preferred strategy for improving standards, MATs must consider how they will implement their chosen approach. This is often driven by their organisational culture, which dictates whether it is better to impose or facilitate change, and whether initiatives should be driven from the bottom or the top. Even though most MATs tend to have staff at the centre with responsibility for school improvement, some do so in order to facilitate gradual or collaborative convergence, while others drive a set approach from the centre.



How robust is our intended strategy in the reality of a changing MAT landscape?

In [section 2](#) we demonstrate how intended strategies do not automatically translate into actual strategies. MATs therefore need to consider what is possible given their context in order to select the optimal game plan. This involves:

- Working within the parameters set by the Department for Education and the Regional Schools Commissioner. These government officials are gatekeepers for growth.
- Meeting obligations. MATs often decide to centralise legal and financial services or invest more in back office functions in order to meet accountability requirements.
- Adapting governance structures in light of the MAT's context. MATs frequently revise their governance structures as their scale changes, while attempting to remain true to their vision and values.
- Responding to schools' current performance. Centralised curriculum and pedagogy models, and the CEO taking a 'hands-on' approach, are sometimes seen as a way of tackling underperformance. However, less centralised approaches are sometimes deemed necessary to give schools space to improve once they have reached a certain standard.
- Having the necessary financial resources. Some MATs do not have the financial freedom to build the central team they want and to grow. However, pressure to secure more funding can also push MATs to grow. Once MATs grow, they often find that it is possible to make savings through economies of scale.
- The central team's capacity and capability. CEOs surrounded by small central teams often take a more 'hands on' leadership approach. However, where CEOs do not have a background in education, they may delegate leading the curriculum, pedagogy and school improvement to members of the central team with educational expertise. As MATs grow they are freer to fund central resources. This allows some MATs to move towards employing a central school improvement team. As MATs grow, CEOs tend to make use of larger central teams to free them up to make strategic decisions.
- The MAT's capacity to deliver school improvement. Single lead schools or central school improvement teams often struggle to service larger networks of schools, and geographic dispersion exacerbates this. MATs therefore often have to switch to peer-to-peer or cluster-based approaches as they grow. However, peer-to-peer support can be difficult where there is a dearth of good practice within a MAT. Therefore, MATs' approaches to school improvement often depend on current capacity.
- The MAT's geographical spread. MATs often adapt their structure based on their geographical spread. Schools that are far from each other can find it harder to collaborate and the core team can find itself at a considerable distance. This frequently results in a shift to a cluster-based model. Meanwhile some MATs find that geographical spread results in individual schools needing to respond to each community's unique needs. This can necessitate a shift in curriculum design and delivery.
- Acquiring new schools and keeping them on board. Some MATs find that where schools are strongly attached to their own values, they have to avoid standardising as much as they might otherwise choose to do.



As they grow MATs will face a number of ‘break points’, where a MAT has to break with a previous strategic or operational approach and make a shift. These inflection points are often associated with a change in scale, but we found that they also occur in response to geographical factors, the national policy context and the type of schools within a MAT’s network. Break points include:

- Maintaining compliance as MATs grow
- Ensuring governance structures and schemes of delegation are fit for purpose
- Balancing growth and capacity
- Necessary changes to the CEO’s role
- Delivering school improvement as MATs grow or become geographically dispersed
- Maintaining local decision-making as MATs become more dispersed

What plans do we have for the future?

Sections 1 and 2 considered how MATs’ strategic approaches are framed by their vision and aims, shaped by contextual factors, and adopted with varying degrees of consistency by the members of their central teams. In **section 3** we consider how MATs’ strategies are also shaped by their future plans, and how these plans are in turn shaped by a range of considerations including:

- MATs’ assessments of their current effectiveness
- The consistency with which these assessments are made within central teams
- The areas of MATs’ operations they intend to standardise further
- Their understanding of the relationship between developing central capacity and taking on new schools
- Their desire to achieve a particular degree of geographical focus or dispersion
- The extent to which they plan to develop a hub or cluster model in order to devolve their school improvement function
- The priorities and demands of the system around them, including Regional Schools Commissioners, local authorities and the Department for Education

Our findings suggest that most MATs tend to rate their effectiveness more highly in terms of their delivery of back office services and less highly in relation to parent and community engagement. Most MAT central teams appeared to have a relatively consistent sense of their effectiveness in different areas, although some MATs displayed more internal variation than others. Information management, back office services and development of senior school staff appear to be areas where MATs are particularly keen to standardise more in the future.

MATs’ future growth plans tend to be expressed in terms of reaching a specific number of schools or pupils, or developing a hub or cluster model. MATs also couch their growth plans in terms of moving into new localities or regions, taking on particular phases or types of school, or merging with other MATs, although these priorities appear to be less prevalent. The distinction between growing in order to increase central capacity, and increasing central capacity in order to support further growth, appears to be a key way of differentiating trusts, with most MATs seeing growth as a prerequisite for further expansion.



Methodology

The findings in this report are based on analysis of two new primary data sets: a large-scale survey of MAT central team members and academy senior leadership and in-depth phone interviews with a partially overlapping sample of MAT CEOs. The survey allowed us to formulate an overarching 'typology' of MATs' aims and strategies, and identify ways in which MATs with different types of strategy appeared to make particular operational decisions. The CEO interviews then provided detailed insights into the ways in which CEOs justified their operational decisions on the basis of their strategic approach and their underlying vision and values, as well as the ways in which operational choices were shaped by growth and a range of contextual factors.

Survey of MAT central teams and academy senior leadership

A web survey was distributed to MAT central team members and academy senior leadership between July and October 2017, achieving 346 responses across 22 MATs. The survey asked two sets of questions.

Firstly, respondents were asked to rate each of the following statements of strategy between one and ten, depending on whether the statement was “not at all like our MAT”, or “exactly like us”:

- “Setting a common vision and culture while maintaining local autonomy in delivery”
- “Scaling a tried and tested model of school improvement”
- “Freeing schools up from administration and operations to focus on teaching and learning”
- “Boosting school leadership and local governance to increase local autonomy and accountability”
- “Helping schools to converge over time in their ways of doing things and their performance through collaboration”
- “Securing back office efficiency savings so that more money can be spent on teaching and learning”
- “Focusing on enrichment while schools pursue their own approach to the core curriculum”
- “Protecting each school’s individual identity”
- “Ensuring each school works to strengthen its community”
- “Creating consistent pedagogy across all schools”



Secondly, respondents were asked how their MAT divides the following operational responsibilities between individual schools and the central team, where '0' represents "entirely devolved to school level" and '10' represents "entirely retained at MAT level":

- Recruitment of principals
- Recruitment of school SLT below principal
- Recruitment of teachers
- Development of senior school staff
- Development of teachers
- Curriculum and assessment in general
- Curriculum and assessment for Year 6 English, maths, science and/or EBacc subjects
- Governance of individual schools in terms of most aspects of budgeting, operations and education
- Design and delivery of school improvement approaches
- Parent and community engagement
- Pupil policies (e.g. behaviour/uniform) and the pastoral system (e.g. safeguarding and the role of form tutors)
- Individual academies' vision and values
- Academy branding and communications
- Back office services (finance, IT, HR, audit, estates, procurement)
- Information management systems and the use of information (e.g. pupil and workforce data)

Cluster analysis was conducted on responses to the 'strategy statements' of 17 MATs with five or more responses, in order to establish whether MATs fell into different 'types' depending on their tendency to align with particular intended strategies. We were then able to establish the characteristics of each cluster group regarding the extent to which they centralised or devolved different functions. Finally, we calculated the range of scores that respondents from the same MAT gave to different strategy statements, in order to establish strategies that tended towards more or less alignment.

Phone interviews with MAT CEOs

Semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with a total of 34 MAT CEOs. Phone interviews were conducted by teams from Parthenon-EY, Ambition School Leadership and LKMco between June and November 2017. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed.

Questions were designed to examine CEOs' perspectives on:

- The vision and USPs of their trust
- The MAT's strategy for realising its vision
- The elements of their MAT's operating model that are central to delivering the trust's strategy
- The trust's growth over time and the strategy behind this growth
- How the trust's operating model has been adapted as the trust has grown
- 'Break points' in the trust's operating model as it has grown
- Their own role and whether it has changed as the trust has grown
- Plans for future growth



Interview transcripts were imported to 'Dedoose' qualitative analysis survey and tagged to attach them to twelve different areas of MATs' operating models:

- Vision and values
- Extra-curricular activities
- Curriculum and pedagogy
- Pupil policies and pastoral system
- Information management
- Parent and community engagement
- Workforce planning and development
- Leadership and management
- Governance
- School improvement support
- Communications and branding
- Shared services and back office functions

Where possible, excerpts tagged with an 'operating model area' were also tagged with a three-point weighting to capture the degree to which MATs centralised that feature of their operations or allowed schools relative autonomy. This combination of qualitative detail and quantitative structuring of the data allowed a 'mixed methods' approach to the first two stages of our analysis of CEO interviews, which considered:

- The approaches MATs took to each operating model area
- The balance of centralisation vs. autonomy within each operating model area

Interview excerpts were flagged with additional tags if they referred to: stages of MAT growth, changes and break points in operating models, future plans, contextual/facilitating factors behind MAT growth, or CEO activities and leadership behaviours. These additional tags allowed us to look for overall themes which captured:

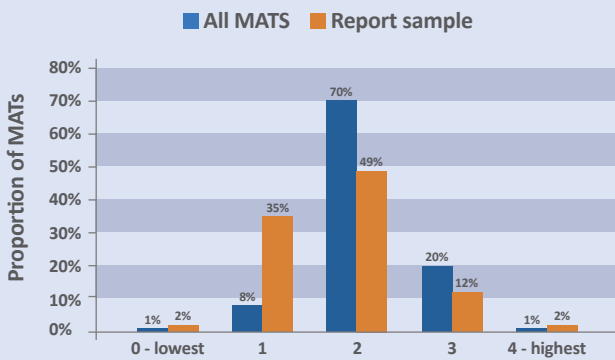
- The ways in which MATs linked their operational approach to their strategy, vision and values
- How MATs had changed their operational approaches as they grew
- Whether, and how, they planned to change their operational approach in the future



The sample

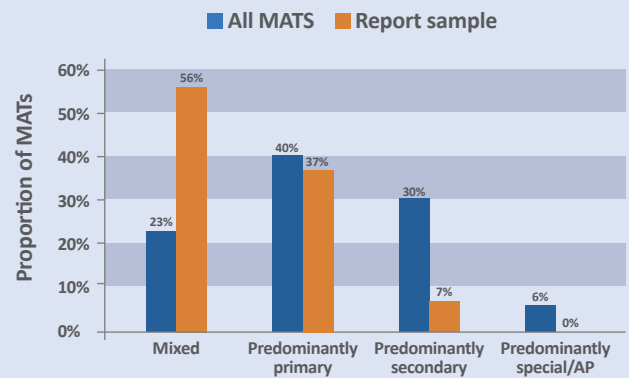
Our sample aimed to ensure representation from a range of different MAT ‘types’ in terms of school type, phase and overall performance. However, we actively approached MATs that were above starter size (7+ schools) in order to allow us to gain insights into MATs’ growth stages. We sent emails and written letters to all MATs with 7+ schools as recorded in EPI’s data set asking if they would like to participate in the research. For those MATs that had already contributed an in-depth case study, we invited them to complete the survey but not a further interview. Our final sample had the following characteristics:

Distribution of MAT performance



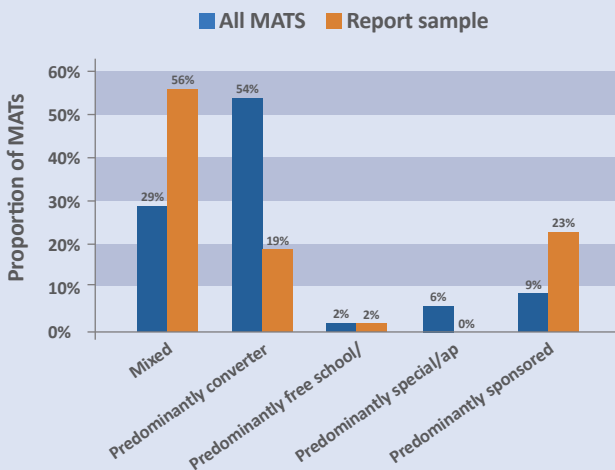
MAT performance based on number of EPI 'performance flags'
All MATs n=1178, Report sample n=47

Distribution of MAT phase mix



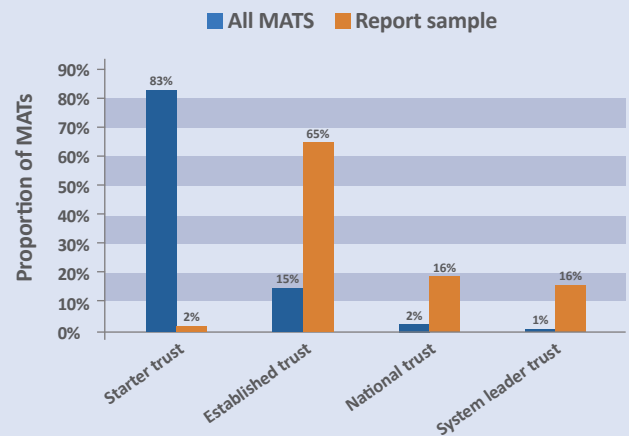
EPI-defined phase group
All MATs n=1178, Report sample n=47

Distribution of MAT type



EPI-defined type group
All MATs n=1178, Report sample n=47

Distribution of MAT size groups



EPI-defined size group. Based on number of schools
All MATs n=1178, Report sample n=47



The difficulties of defining MAT performance

A MAT's performance can be characterised in a range of ways, from the educational outcomes a trust achieves for different pupil groups, to the broader standard of its schools, to its financial sustainability. [In their quantitative analysis of the characteristics and performance of multi-academy trusts](#), the Education Policy Institute proposes a composite measure of the performance of multi-academy trusts, based on:

- Their current performance (whether pupil progress in reading, writing and maths at the end of KS2 and in Progress 8 at the end of KS4 is significantly different from average)
- Their improvement in outcomes (whether the value-added of schools at the end of KS2 and KS4 has improved over time in comparison to schools with a similar starting point)
- The attainment of disadvantaged pupils
- School standards: whether any schools in the MAT are currently rated 'inadequate' by Ofsted
- Financial sustainability: whether there are any schools in the trust whose expenditure is substantially higher than their income

While a composite measure captures the breadth of ways in which a MAT's performance can be assessed, using any measure to draw meaningful comparisons between MATs faces a number of difficulties due to variation in factors such as MATs' size, age, and their sponsor/converter balance. Moreover, and as EPI acknowledges, the process of re-brokering – whereby weaker schools are removed from poorly performing trusts – can artificially inflate the performance indicators of weaker trusts on a single or composite measure.



Appendix: Strategy cluster descriptions

Hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted in R, in order to examine whether any 'types' of MAT emerged based on their average responses to the various strategy statements we asked in our survey. Hierarchical clustering was chosen because it is a well used statistical method and can be used with ordinal data and scale data. The average agglomeration (linkage) method best reflected the data so was used in the analysis. The analysis initially indicated two main clusters when analysing average MAT results for the strategy questions for those MATs with ≥ 5 responses. The fit of MATs into clusters was not very high when the analysis generated two clusters, with a silhouette coefficient of 0.19. The analysis was rerun with three clusters and the silhouette coefficient increased to 0.25 out of $-/+1$ - still relatively modest. This split the larger cluster group into two; one with six MATs and the other with nine.

The cluster analysis was conducted by Alice Luetchford.

Cluster 1 (n=6)

This group's focus tended to be on supporting a sense of autonomy and individuality. For example, MATs in this cluster tended to rate the following strategy statements more highly:

- 'setting a common vision and culture while maintaining local autonomy in delivery'
- 'boosting school leadership and local governance to increase local autonomy and accountability'
- 'focusing on enrichment while schools pursue their own approach to the core curriculum'
- 'protecting each school's individual identity'

Meanwhile teaching, learning and pedagogy were relatively low priorities for these MATs, which generally gave lower scores to the following strategy statements:

- 'freeing schools up from administration and operations to focus on teaching and learning'
- 'securing back office savings so that more money can be spent on teaching and learning'
- 'creating consistent pedagogy across all schools'

Cluster 2 (n=9)

MATs in cluster 2 appeared to be more focused on pedagogy and school improvement. This was prioritised over schools' individual autonomy. Cluster 2 MATs tended to give higher scores to the following strategy statements:

- 'creating consistent pedagogy across all schools'
- 'scaling a tried and tested model of school improvement'
- 'freeing up schools from administration and operations to focus on teaching and learning'
- 'securing back office efficiency savings so that more money can be spent on teaching and learning'
- 'creating consistent pedagogy across all schools'



Their lower prioritisation of individual schools’ autonomy meant they tended to give lower scores in areas such as ‘focusing on enrichment while schools pursue their own approach to the core curriculum’ and ‘protecting each school’s identity’. They also rated other areas related to autonomy and identity slightly lower too, including:

- ‘boosting school leadership and local governance to increase local autonomy and accountability’
- ‘setting a common vision and culture while maintaining local autonomy in delivery’

Cluster 3 (n=2)

MATs in cluster 3 did not rate any of the strategies particularly highly, perhaps indicating either that none of those provided was a good representation of their chosen approach, or a degree of uncertainty over how to articulate their strategy. What seemed to matter most to these MATs was community and identity, since they mainly prioritised:

- ‘protecting each school's individual identity’
- ‘ensuring each school works to strengthen its community’

The lowest rated areas for cluster 3 schools were:

- ‘scaling a tried and tested model of school improvement’
- ‘freeing schools up from administration and operations to focus on teaching and learning’
- ‘securing back office savings so that more money can be spent on teaching and learning’
- ‘creating consistent pedagogy across all schools’

Phase mix	Clusters		
	1	2	3
Mixed	1	6	
Predominantly Primary	5	2	2
Predominantly Secondary		1	

School type mix	Clusters		
	1	2	3
Mixed	4	4	1
Predominantly converter		2	
Predominantly sponsored	2	3	1

Trust size (pupil numbers)	Clusters		
	1	2	3
Established trust	4	2	2
National trust	1	5	
System leader trust	1	2	

Trust size (school numbers)	Clusters		
	1	2	3
Established trust	3	5	2
National trust	2	1	
System leader trust	1	3	

Geographical spread	Clusters		
	1	2	3
All schools within 1 hour		3	1
All schools within 1 hour of at least one school	5	6	1
Some isolation (less than one fifth of schools)	1		

Have they grown rapidly from 2012 – 2017?	Clusters		
	1	2	3
No	3	9	2
Yes	3		





Building Trusts: MAT leadership and coherence of vision, strategy and operations

This research investigates how a MAT's vision translates into its strategy and operating model, and how these are affected by growth.

After engaging with over 40 CEOs and surveying the staff from 22 trusts, the report explores the strategic choices taken by leaders, how this affects the way their trusts operate and how changes in the scale, geography and school performance of a MAT can create break points that mean a trust has to change its approach.

This research will inform the development of Ambition School Leadership's executive leadership programme, Executive Educators: Building and Leading a Sustainable MAT.

 [Visit here for more details.](#)

LKMco work across the education, youth and policy sectors. They help organisations develop and evaluate projects for young people and carry out academic and policy research and campaign about the issues that matter.



-
LKMco
www.lkmco.org
info@lkmco.org

-
Ambition School Leadership
ambitionschoolleadership.org.uk
info@ambitionschoolleadership.org.uk

-
CJK Associates
chris.kirk7@btinternet.com

