

Multi academy trusts in England: a scenario of cooperation with universities

Abstract

Purpose: We present our views of University-Multi Academy Trusts' (MATs) opportunities for future interconnectivity that could support successful partnerships.

Methodology: We developed a matrix of University-MATs partnerships that could help identifying potential scenarios of collaboration between universities and MATs.

Findings: Four potential scenarios of collaborations are proposed (Board membership, Academic supervision, Recruitment support, and Academic support).

Practical implications: The matrix will be useful for universities and MATs management for potential cooperation in the future.

Theoretical implications: Scholars in the field can further investigate the four proposed scenarios in the matrix in future studies.

Originality: Proposing four scenarios of cooperation between MATs and universities.

Keywords: Multi Academy Trust, England, UK universities.

Universities and MATs

A popular model of governing the pre-university sector in England is the Multi Academies Trusts (Department for Education, 2016). In a multi academy trust, a single trust with its members, trustees and governors is responsible for a number of academies (usually primary and secondary schools), in order to share best practice, get economic benefit by centralised services, focus funds, increase and flexibly allocate staff resources, and establish succession planning programmes. There are over 1200 MATs in England now ranging from small to large, almost in the same district area, with a trend of having similar educational institutions (either primary or secondary) in the same trust. Recently, some concerns were raised by Ofsted inspection reports regarding the overall performance of MATs. Amongst others, the reports highlight the lack of capacity within the governance structures, leadership and management weaknesses.

Although partnerships between universities and MATs could be seen as opportunities to solve the above problems and bring mutual benefit to both parties, only a few partnerships of this type exist in England. Through such partnerships, universities could provide staff to help with specialist subjects and in shaping the learning and teaching activities. These partnerships could also provide students with opportunities of extra curricula activities, perhaps based at the university (sports facilities – Labs) and core activities (access to labs and facilities). They could also mentor and guide students and give them experience of what is expected after schooling (the university life) and to be prepared for Higher Education. Sir David Carter, The National Schools' Commissioner in England views the partnerships between universities and MATs as driving forward the improvement in the sector (<https://www.tes.com/news/>).

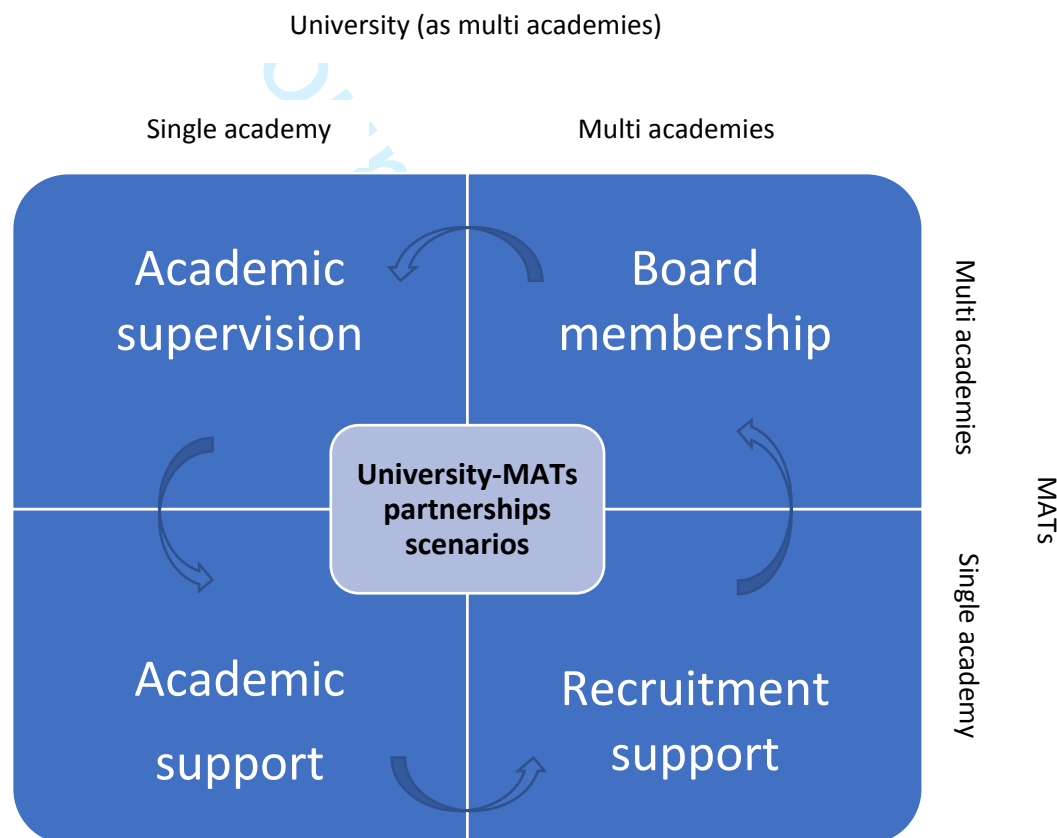
Practically, MATs could also create opportunities for partner universities through delivering progression routes to the academic programs at these universities, an area of practice and research that has not been tackled by practitioners and scholars in the field. Theoretically, most prior studies in this field examined issues such as leadership within MATs (Gibson, 2018; Cliffe et al, 2018) external accountability for MATs (Ehren and Godfrey, 2017; Wilkins, 2017) but did not cover the phenomenon of University-MATs partnership.

University-MATs, potential scenarios of collaboration

While the current practice of Multi Academies Trusts (MATs) offers good opportunities to share best practice and benefit from the economies of scale by centralising services, there are

further opportunities to be explored through linking with universities. Partnerships with the university sector could present opportunities for MATs and universities for better sharing of resources and securing future success.

We developed a proposition for potential cooperation and partnership between both sides. The Matrix of University-MATs partnerships identifies four integrated scenarios of collaboration. On the horizontal axis of the matrix, the university is presented as either a multi-academies institution (faculties, schools and academic departments) or a single academy (faculty or school). On the vertical axis, the MATs is presented as a body of either multi academies or one single academy.



Scenario 1: Board membership. In this scenario, the two parties, the University and/or the MATs could have one or more of their current board members representing the partnership. This scenario will help taking decisions jointly when it comes to issues related to both bodies. Most current MATs' boards of governance do not have members from universities' boards of governance and vice versa. The most common practice under this scenario is the universities' sponsorship for a MAT in their region, mainly through universities' schools of education. Actual examples of this scenario are; University of Chester Academies Trust (UCAT) and the Education Central Multi Academy Trust (ECMAT) sponsored by the University of Wolverhampton. According to (Ofsted, 2017a), the performance of some of these MATs were negatively evaluated despite universities' board membership.

Scenario 2: Academic supervision. The academic supervision scenario takes place when an academic unit within the university provides supervision and support to the different academies within the MATs. This could be within a specific discipline. As a general example, a school of

business at a particular university could provide academic advice, giving MATs' students the experience of university life, providing the opportunities for university-based curricula and access to labs and facilities, research to different primary/secondary schools which are members of the MATs. This scenario would be related to the first scenario through the academic supervision provided by one school of the university (schools of education are the common cases) to the work of the Trust. An actual high-quality example of such partnership is the University of Chichester Multi-Academy Trust (UCMAT) which is a Trust made up of 12 academies in West Sussex, Hampshire and Portsmouth. The Trust is sponsored by the University of Chichester, and has a robust school improvement model, supported by experts from the university's Institute of Education (Ofsted, 2017b). Some other examples are University of Brighton Academies Trust; Birmingham City University Academics Trust (BCUAT); Staffordshire University Academies Trust; University of Winchester Academies Trust (UWINAT); Teesside University Learning Trust; TED WRAGG Multi Academy Trust at Graduate School of Education at University of Exeter; and South Bank Multi Academy Trust run by the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment at London South Bank University.

Scenario 3: Recruitment support. This scenario is based on sharing experiences between the university and the MATs to find the best model of helping potential future students to admit to the university. Technically speaking, the board of trustees' membership (Scenario 1) actioned by the academic supervision (Scenario 2) and academic support (Scenario 4) will form an opportunity for universities through the linkages established with the MATs to deliver a progression route to the university (Scenario 3). While such a model of undergraduate students' recruitment is widely used by some universities and further education colleges in UK, University-MATs partnership under scenario 3 could be a platform to replicate such a recruitment model.

Scenario 4: Academic support. Under this scenario only one single academy within the university provides close support to one single academy within the MAT. The academic support could include curricula, teaching and learning program advice. This scenario could help in articulating the single academy in a direction that could help in supporting the third scenario.

Remarks

The above matrix proposes some opportunities for different levels of cooperation for both the university (as an entity of multi-academies) and MAT (multi-academies trust). The four scenarios are based on the dynamic inter-connectedness between the two bodies, so the proposed partnerships between the two bodies can either be developed from top level (board membership) or bottom level (academic support). However, there are still issues of clear mutual benefits for both sides. For example, while increasing student recruitment from secondary schools to universities could be a crucial issue for universities, the academic supervision and support would be a key driver for MATs.

The proposed scenarios show how University-MATs partnerships could help in creating sustainable learning communities reflecting a win-win situation and call for a review of the current common structure of cooperation that is limited in scope and based on sponsorship relationship between universities and MATs.

The Charter Schools' Networks in USA and their links with universities provide support to our integrated scenarios as universities responsibilities are not limited to only sponsorship but there would be research, technical assistance, evaluation, information distribution and recruitment. An example could be drawn from their practice of exposing students to the universities' culture

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3 and ethos, preparing them for university life and linking their school work to university
4 curriculum to facilitate university entry in the future.
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6 It is worth noting that the participating universities in University-MATs partnerships in
7 England are all new universities (post 1992). MATs members are usually from the same local
8 areas and the bottom level activities (academic supervision) are usually undertaken by schools
9 of education where other schools are rarely involved in this process.
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12 Theoretically, given the fact that no previous studies have investigated the partnerships
13 between universities and MATs, scholars in the field are encouraged to explore these
14 partnerships and examine our proposed four scenarios of University-MATs cooperation.
15 Furthermore, comparative studies of the University-MATs mission, governance, practices, and
16 performance would reveal more about this phenomenon.
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