



# Demystifying MAT expansion



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## The 'why' and 'how' of MAT growth

Multi-academy trust growth is an area of opportunity. As academisation developed from a small-scale Labour policy into a major education policy of post-2010 governments, MATs became a way for academies to share their resources, objectives and planning.

From extending a vision, supporting underperforming schools through to achieving economies of scale, there are numerous incentives for MATs to grow.

In this whitepaper, we examine the case for growth for MATs within the education landscape and how this can be effectively achieved. By examining existing MAT mergers and the impact these have had, we explore the benefits, impacts and implications of academy expansion.



## Demystifying MAT expansion

2018

**March 2018:** There are 1,374 MATs

**October 2016:** DfE u-turns on this plan, with no legislation introduced to enforce academisation – but still encourages schools to academise and join MATs

**March 2016:** DfE publishes ‘Educational excellence everywhere’ white paper, which set out plans for all schools to become academies by 2022

**September 2010:** Michael Gove comments on the success of the early ‘large academy chains’ Harris and Ark

**July 2010:** Academies Act opens the academy route to all publicly funded schools in England and allows schools to form MATs

**May 2010:** 203 open academies in existence as the coalition government is formed

**September 2002:** The first academies open

**2000:** Learning and Skills Act introduces the first academies, established by Labour to improve underperforming schools

2000



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# The case for growth

## The needs of MATs

The potential benefits and advantages of growing a MAT include:

- Taking advantage of economies of scale and sharing central costs
- Providing more opportunities for staff development across the trust
- Increasing the scope for sharing staff knowledge and expertise, as well as school improvement resource
- Extending a trust's impact on raising education standards

There is no magic size for a MAT to achieve the above advantages; one report suggests 8 to 20 academies (or 2,500 to 7,500 pupils), whilst one DfE official puts the "sweet spot" a little higher - 12-20 academies or 5,000 to 10,000 pupils.

This is not to say MATs cannot operate well at smaller sizes. But, where smaller MATs are facing resource difficulties, they may have to consider growth as a solution.

Total no. of MATs:

**1,374**

Average no. of schools in a MAT:

**4**

Number of MATs with 8 or more schools:

**191**

Number of MATs with 12 or more schools:

**82**

Average number of pupils in a MAT:

**1,027**

If MATs had 5,000 pupils (average), there'd only be

**282 MATs**

*Figures as of March 2018*



***Smaller MATs  
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solution to  
resource issues***

## The needs of the sector

There is a wider case for MAT growth, too. The national capacity of available MATs to sponsor underperforming schools – which is the government’s strategy for improving their performance – is a concern. According to the National Audit Office:

“...unless the Department increases the number of active sponsors ... the existing active sponsors would each need to take on an average of just under four additional schools”.

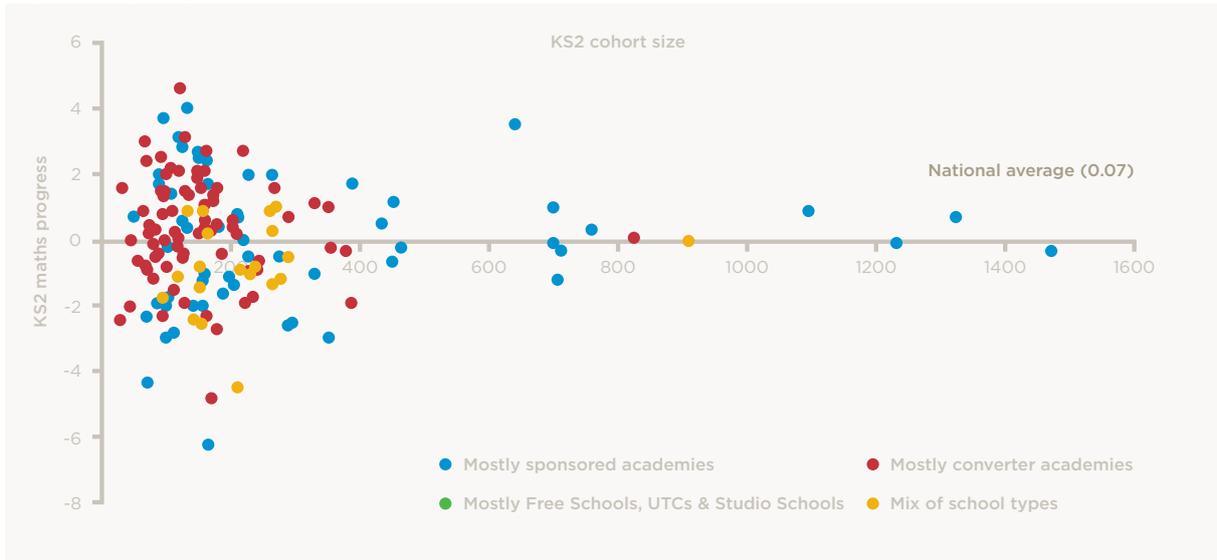
Whilst a MAT may be considering growth as part of its own vision and resources, there is a national need for MATs that can take on struggling schools.

## What growth is not

Despite the obvious benefits of expansion, MAT growth is not a magic fix for improving pupil outcomes. There is no obvious correlation between the size of a MAT and the outcomes of the pupils, so growth is not the route to better results. Simply put, pupils can do well in a 2-school MAT or equally well within a 70-school MAT; not to mention single academies and maintained schools.

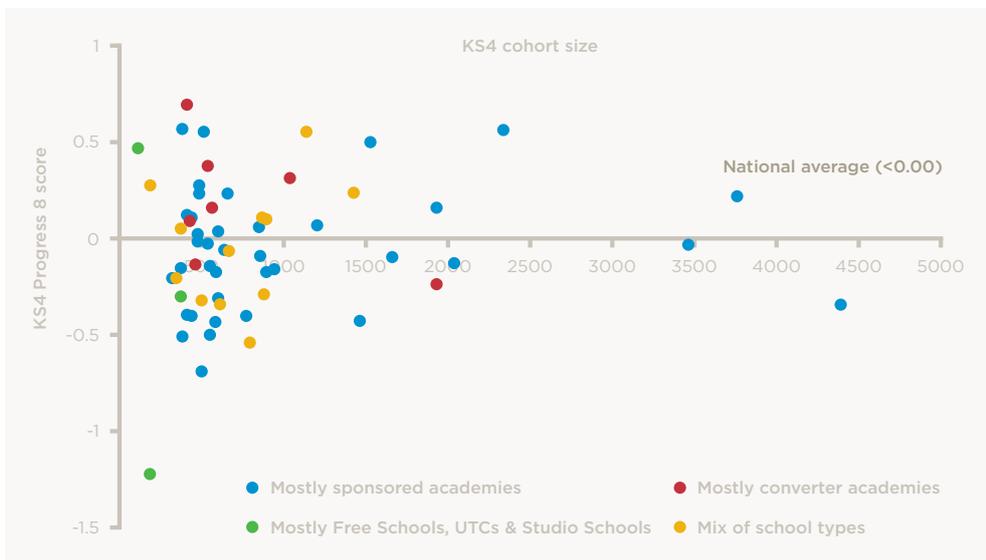
**Maths progress MAT measure by pupils in key stage 2 cohort and type of academy**

England, Key Stage 2, Academic Year 2016



**Progress 8 MAT measure by number of pupils in key stage 4 cohort**

England, Key Stage 4, Academic Year 2016/17



Source: Official statistics, MAT performance measures: England, 2016 to 2017, Department for Education

***There is no obvious correlation between the size of a MAT and the outcomes of the pupils, so growth is not the route to better results.***



# Getting growth right

There may be a need to grow MATs, but the existence of this need doesn't magically create their capacity to grow. Insufficient leadership capacity, stretching of central services and communication difficulties are all potential (and common) issues that can arise without planning.

Sustainable growth requires planning and forethought. Selected suggestions from the 'Planning for multi-academy trust expansion' series on The Key include:

- Ensure that systems and procedures have the capacity to grow in order to avoid bottlenecks. If trusts require more back office staff, hire them in good time
- Allow school business managers (SBMs) to be strategic. If their workload grows and they are expected to assist in operational tasks (such as processing invoices or answering phones), they will have little capacity for strategic management
- Make sure that it is a worthwhile match with something in it for both parties. If it is just to provide extra resources, MATs must ask themselves whether this is the correct reason
- Consider offering a year-long 'trial' before taking on a school. The proposed parent MAT can, for a price, offer resources to a school (such as expertise in management, leadership, governance or subject teaching) with a view to seeing if the two cultures are compatible
- Build a back office that can do the job: do not rely on the existing administrative structure to cope when the organisation grows. Maintained schools have the local authority as a support for a wide range of professional services, and as such will need to build an equivalent back office that supports all schools in the MAT.

***MATs can offer a year-long 'trial' before taking on a school***



## A clear and focused vision

The vision of the MAT is critical to sustainable growth. If a MAT lacks, or is unaware of its vision, it cannot effectively evaluate whether a potential new school will be a good fit. MATs should only be adding schools that fit into their vision, which they can only know if it is well defined. Similarly, the school needs to see the benefits of the vision of the MAT – especially if it is markedly different from their current vision – if they are going to buy into it.

That sense of buy-in to the vision of the MAT is important to foster once the school has joined. Holding a trust-wide INSET day, for all staff from every school, can be a very effective way to ensure that a vision is effectively translated to all teams. It can additionally be powerful if the chair or CEO communicates to everyone what the trust's vision is and what the staff mean to the MAT.



## Synchronised systems

If the vision is one side of the coin, there are also practicalities to be considered once a school joins. MATs often take on schools with existing systems, such as for IT, finance, HR, payroll and reporting pupil absence, and end up with disparate systems 'bolted on'.

This can then ultimately become extremely time-consuming for MAT leaders. Ideally, there should simply be 'one view' of information and a single accepted suite of systems and software (eg when dealing with finance systems), which can be easily consolidated across different schools.

When a school joins, it should be plainly explained that they must move onto the trust's preferred systems, and the relevant MAT staff, such as the finance director or chief operating officer, should help them move to this.

*Ideally, there should simply be 'one view' of information and a single accepted suite of systems and software*

## Case study: operations and systems for effective growth

*Mark Ducker, CEO of STEP Academy Trust, spoke to us about their expansion process. STEP are a MAT of 14 primary schools across South London and East Sussex.*

### The process

STEP has a clear due diligence process when adding schools to the trust and this process is based on the design principles of the organisation. **This starts with an 'opportunity assessment' to assess the compatibility of the joining school with STEP's mission and vision**, and considers whether the partnership will make a positive difference to the life chances of children.

The due diligence of teaching and learning, health and safety, community relationships and a host of other factors follows if the opportunity assessment is positive. Finance will inform the decision, but financial gain is never a motive for growing the trust.

The outcomes for children – and not STEP's balance sheet – are at the heart of the decision. As well as considering how it will help the new school, the needs of the children in the MAT also have to be taken into account.

**STEP also design operational structure for the next stage of growth, rather than the current one.** Having the capacity ahead of expansion reduces the risk of too many resources and staff being drawn from an existing school to a new one, which can have an adverse impact on the pupils.

**Consistency vs standardisation is a key consideration of growth.** STEP list the different areas across their schools and, for each one, ask where there needs to be absolute standardisation (for instance, on finance and statutory obligations) and where there could be more differentiation. ▶





## The outcomes

STEP's schools were initially based in south London, but expanded to East Sussex having been approached to support 2 schools there. Had they looked purely from a financial perspective, they may not have taken these schools on. However, a relationship was undoubtedly in the interests of the pupils there and in the interests of the pupils already at STEP. The trust was able to extend their mission and support those schools, and the current pupils became part of a community beyond south London.

They were only able to take on the schools by planning for the next stage of growth. When they were approached to work with the 2 schools in East Sussex, they had a headteacher without a school who was ready to travel, and a deputy who was ready to become a headteacher - so the trust had its 2 headteachers ready to be deployed.

By investing in synchronised systems, they've made savings that can be invested back into the organisation. The proportion of their overall payroll spend on teachers increased by 10% because of the savings made by bringing HR and catering in-house.

All the way down to the lunch menu, they are able to weigh up consistency vs standardisation. Whilst all schools have to use high quality ingredients, the schools in south London are able to tailor their menu for their high proportion of Caribbean and West African pupils.

# MAT mergers



The alternative to growing via adding individual schools is, of course, to merge existing MATs together.

There are already some MATs that have been formed via the merger route.

The main driver behind any increase in MAT mergers will be that it's simply easier for a MAT to expand quickly by joining together with another MAT, rather than adding schools one by one.

This isn't to say that mergers are currently commonplace, but based on the needs for expansion and smaller MATs looking to more quickly achieve the economies of scale, we're likely to see them more in the near future.

If there are risks to expanding by adding one school at a time, these are obviously multiplied when looking to merge two groups of schools at once – so the same considerations have to go in.

***Based on the needs for expansion we're likely to see more mergers in the near future***



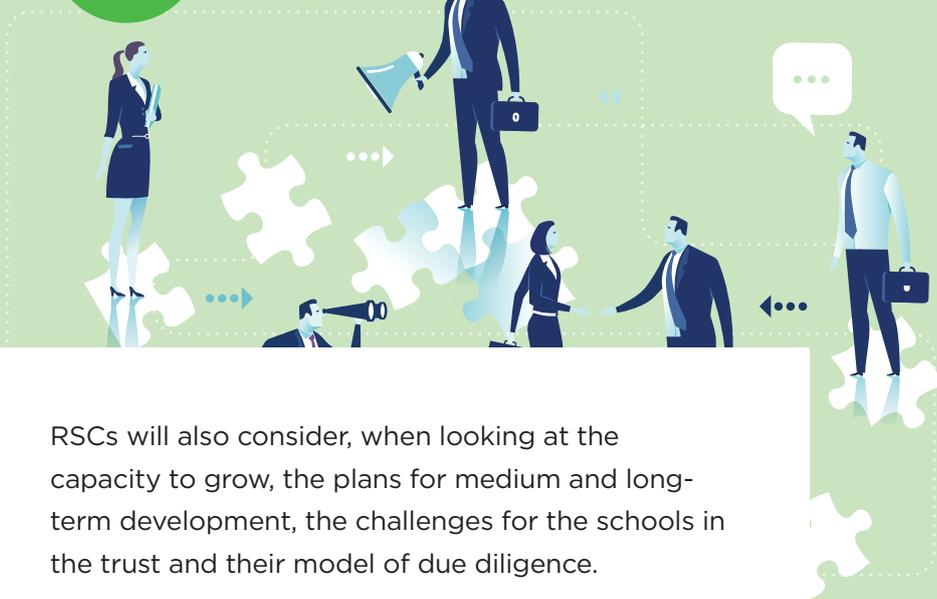
*RSCs will look at the new MAT's capacity for supporting school improvement*

## How does the process differ when merging 2 MATs?

If a MAT wishes to merge with another MAT, they should first contact their regional schools commissioner (RSC), who will assign and open up communications with the relevant project lead. This then offers a chance to discuss the rationale for the merger, as well as what the headteacher board (HTB) and RSC will expect to see in the application.

The process is treated in a similar way to proposals to form new MATs. For instance, among other things, the RSC's office will want to know the proposed structure of the MAT and who the members of the trust and trustees will be. RSCs will also look at the new MAT's capacity for supporting school improvement, for example:

- Do leaders have a clear understanding of excellent teaching and learning practice for all pupils (including those with additional needs)?
- Is there a clear, quality-driven education vision and the capacity to deliver it?
- Does the trust ensure that information about children's progress at school is well understood and acted upon throughout the organisation? ►



RSCs will also consider, when looking at the capacity to grow, the plans for medium and long-term development, the challenges for the schools in the trust and their model of due diligence.

If the application to merge is accepted, either the 2 MATs are closed and a new one created, or 1 MAT (usually the smaller) is closed and the schools transferred to the other. Though the latter is the DfE’s preferred route, each case is treated differently and this is where independent legal advice must be considered.

## Appendix

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/michael-gove-responds-to-the-findings-of-the-national-audit-office-report-on-academies>
2. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/329760/the-growth-of-academy-chains-implications-for-leaders-and-leadership.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/329760/the-growth-of-academy-chains-implications-for-leaders-and-leadership.pdf)
3. <http://www.reform.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Academy-Chains-unlocked-5.10.2016.pdf>
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/lord-agnew-by-working-together-we-can-achieve-so-much-more>
5. <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Converting-maintained-schools-to-academies.pdf>
6. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/576240/Multi-academy\\_trusts\\_good\\_practice\\_guidance\\_and\\_expectations\\_for\\_growth.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/576240/Multi-academy_trusts_good_practice_guidance_and_expectations_for_growth.pdf)
7. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/684244/SFR02\\_2018\\_text.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/684244/SFR02_2018_text.pdf)

## How The Key supports MAT leaders

The Key provide essential tools, and expert guidance to help MAT leaders deliver efficiencies and cost savings, manage risk and improve performance across their trust.

### We can help you to...



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