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# The implications of academisation for English Sixth Form Colleges

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Jonathan Godfrey was the Principal of Hereford Sixth Form college for 20 years, having previously worked in colleges in Henley on Thames, Huddersfield and Worcester. In 2016, Hereford Sixth Form College was the inaugural winner of the TES Sixth Form College of the Year award. He has been Chair of the Sixth form Colleges Association and regularly represented the sector in discussions with education officials and Ministers, including giving evidence to the Public Accounts Committee in 2011 on value for money in post-16 education. Jonathan is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Worcester.

Geoffrey Elliott has taught in comprehensive schools, further, adult and higher education, and has undertaken a range of leadership roles during his career. He is President of the Association for Research in Post-Compulsory Education, and serves on the Board of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education. Geoffrey edits the international peer reviewed journal Research in Post-Compulsory Education, and is currently Professor of Post-Compulsory Education at the University of Worcester specialising in education policy, leadership and lifelong learning.

The implications of academisation for English Sixth Form Colleges – an exploratory case study

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of academisation on English Sixth Form Colleges through the lens of the Principals and Governors who lead such organisations - those who have decided to opt for academisation, and those who have not. A comprehensive survey of the Principals or Chairs of 35 Sixth Form Colleges, representing all regions of England, supplemented by a small number of follow-up interviews, generated five distinct but overlapping themes that seemed to resonate with the majority of respondents: Autonomy, Funding, Local Circumstances, Strategy and Quality. Unpacking these themes and identifying

their inter-relationships could be helpful to those leading Sixth Form Colleges considering academisation, as well as providing a research framework for future work and a distinctive contribution to the theoretical literature. We believe we demonstrate that academisation can be seen as a significant example of how the marketisation of education has created an illusory set of market freedoms commonly held to be achievable through academisation, that are in fact highly constrained by government policy and accountability mechanisms. The article concludes by considering some implications of the data and our analysis for policy and practice in the Sixth Form College sector, and some suggestions of where further research is urgently needed.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors have agreed to make available their survey and interview data, suitably anonymised.

#### KEY WORDS

Sixth Form College, Multi Academy Trust, academisation, marketisation, leadership,

#### INTRODUCTION

Education reform never takes place in a policy vacuum and any assessments of trends and impacts should be seen in their wider political contexts (Elliott 1999). One of the most significant changes in state school education in the last generation has been the move towards academisation, which can be seen as part of a wider shift towards the marketisation of education not only in the UK but worldwide (Ball 2013, Apple 2013, Heilbronn 2016), embracing an impoverished view of education that underpins such neo-liberal policies (Pring 2012). The Academies Act (DfE 2010) instituted a far-reaching rebalancing of the governance of schools, from a partnership between government, LEAs, and the schools themselves, to a privately sponsored trust, effectively 'moving state funded schools from the public to the private sector' (Heilbronn 2016: 306). This parallels movements elsewhere in Europe towards privately sponsored and governed schools, such as the *friskolor* in Sweden, the self-managing schools of Australia and New Zealand and the charter school system in the US.

Academisation was initially a scheme to improve failing schools by taking them out of local authority control. When good or outstanding schools were allowed to convert, academies were later encouraged to group together to form multi academy trusts (MATs). The strong drive towards academisation was led by the policy conviction, shared by all parties in

government in recent years, that ‘Multi academy trusts are the best long-term formal arrangement for stronger schools to support the improvement of weaker schools.’ (DfE 2016, p. 57). There was a widely held view in government that the education system was in crisis – an interpretation strongly supported by analysis of the discourses of relevant contemporary educational policy documents (Francis 2015). This led to the expansion of the academy programme, initially conceived as a panacea for failing schools, into a ‘project aimed at introducing greater autonomy and competition into the state school sector’ (Eyles et al 2018: 123) with a view to increasing educational standards nationwide in a government-led drive to convert all schools into academies.

The benefits and drawbacks of academisation have been widely debated in the professional (NAS/UWT 2016), popular (THES 2018) and academic literature (Gorard 2009, Brundrett 2012, Gibson 2018). Both stances are clearly represented by our respondents later in this article. Generally, the focus in all the literature has been upon secondary and to a lesser extent primary schools since it was these institutions which were the first to apply for and to be awarded academy status. However since March 2017 an increasing number of Sixth Form Colleges (SFCs) have converted to either single or multi academy trusts, and it is these that are the focus of this article.

SFCs have gained a deserved reputation for academic excellence (Hodgson and Spours 2015), and remain a popular destination for 16 year olds (Education Funding Agency 2018), most of whom achieve good A level results and progress to UK universities (SFCA 2018). We believe that this is the first study in the UK to focus specifically on the academisation of Sixth Form Colleges and the particular challenges faced by them. In it, we look at the academisation of English SFCs through the lens of the Principals and Governors who lead such institutions, those who have decided to opt for academisation, and those who have not. We believe this will offer an important alternative perspective to the policy rhetoric surrounding academisation in post-compulsory education as well as well-informed insights into the strategic and practical implications of this important and ongoing policy initiative.

It is important to recognise that Principals and Governors are not a homogenous group, which provides a strong rationale for exploring their choices, rationales, motives and concerns. We highlight some core themes that emerge from our data that we believe will be illuminating to those leading SFCs considering academisation, as well as providing a research framework for future work and a distinctive contribution to the theoretical literature, in which, still, ‘studies of Sixth Form Colleges occupy a very small space’ (Briggs 2004: 119). First, we provide some context for the English SFC sector.

## THE SIXTH FORM COLLEGES IN ENGLAND

Sixth form or further education (16-18) is provided in school sixth forms, SFCs and General Further Education Colleges (GFECs). The most common courses offered in school sixth forms and SFCs are A levels and BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) qualifications which are the entry requirements for most universities. Students usually study 3 or 4 subjects at this level depending on their degree or career aspirations. SFCs also offer a range of general vocational courses and the opportunity for students to retake GCSEs. It was common for SFCs to require all students without at least a C grade to retake English and Maths GCSE, even prior to its being made a condition of funding by the ESFA in 2014 (ESFA July 2014). GFECs offer some A levels and GCSEs but the majority of their courses are vocational, cover the full ability range and cater for all ages.

SFCs were established in the late 1960s when some local authorities responding to the comprehensive agenda centralised sixth form provision in larger institutions and created 11-16 schools. As a result of the Further and Higher Education Act (DfE 1992) all SFCs and FECs were taken out of local authority control, becoming self-governing, centrally funded institutions and in 2015 SFCs were given the opportunity to become academies (DfE 2015).

The percentage of disadvantaged students in SFCs is 21%, in non-selective schools and academies 19% and in selective school/academy sixth forms 6%. Sixth form education is funded at a lower rate than both pre-16 and higher education. The current average funding of £4,485 per student for all students aged 16-19 is 21% less than that received for educating younger students in secondary schools and 50% less than the average university fee of £8,996 (SFCA 2018).

The underfunding of 16-19 education is felt most acutely by SFCs and GFECs, as unlike 11-18 schools, they cannot cross-subsidise from the more generous funding available for younger students and, unless they have assumed academy status, are not eligible to reclaim Value Added Tax (a tax on capital and equipment purchases of 20%, between £200-400K for a typical college). Despite their low level of funding, the SFCs have a strong record for their high levels of achievement and the experience they offer students (Conlon and Halterbecke 2014). A level points scores per entry are 31.25, compared with 30.46 in academy school sixth forms and 29.4 in other school sixth forms (DfE 2017).

## THE ACADEMISATION AGENDA

From 1997, the Labour government's education policy was dominated by a commitment to greater autonomy, parental choice and improving pupil performance (Campbell 2001). The Learning and Skills Act of 2000 established a new school sector, academies, 'to improve pupil performance and break the cycle of low expectations' (Blunkett 2000a).

Academies originally were required to have a private sponsor from the business sector, a measure intended to directly address the poor leadership held to exist in the failing schools that they replaced (Blunkett 2000b). Sponsors were required to contribute 10% of the academy's capital costs but this requirement was lifted when the government sought to attract Ofsted 'outstanding' schools and charities to become sponsors. The original academies were low-performing schools, often in special measures (Brundrett 2012).

By May 2010 there were 203 sponsored academies in England and although there was no strong evidence that academisation led to improved outcomes for pupils the government expanded the sector. The Academies Act of 2010 enabled Ofsted 'good or outstanding' maintained schools to convert to academy status. The governing body became a charitable trust and the school was funded by central government. This second wave of academies became known as 'converter' academies to distinguish them from the first wave of 'sponsored' academies.

The encouragement for schools to academise continued under the Conservative controlled coalition government. Many secondary schools saw institutional autonomy and access to funding previously used by the local authority to deliver collective services, such as IT services or home to school transport, as an attractive option. In some areas the majority of schools are academies and although local authorities have statutory responsibility for issues such as admissions, transport and safeguarding, they have little power or funding to exercise these responsibilities.

Some academies are grouped together in MATs with an over-arching controlling body. Current government policy is to encourage all academies to join MATs to share resources and good practice and to reduce the number of trusts centrally managed by the DFE.

The national representative body for SFCs is the Sixth Form Colleges Association (SFCA). In 2012 the SFCA initiated a debate with member colleges on academisation. Informal discussion with the DFE had suggested that by academising, SFCs could partially address their funding difficulties by gaining eligibility to reclaim VAT and also make a more formal contribution to the school improvement agenda, particularly supporting small school sixth forms which had been shown to be underperforming. (Nic Boles MP, 2014).

David Igoe, then Chief Executive of SFCA summarised the pros and cons:

Academy status brings clear financial benefit through the VAT rebate, and a much less onerous MIS (management information system) and audit requirement; pay and conditions can be re-aligned to school mechanisms and the School Teachers Pay Review Body; access to capital may be more favourable; it will be easier to form partnerships with academy schools and may limit unhelpful and wasteful 16-19 competition; becoming an academy puts the sector clearly inside the policy

ambitions of the coalition government and this makes it more likely that colleges will be supported going forward - It's now the only show in town! (Igoe 2012)

He summarised the negatives as:

Unlike designated SFCs, academies cannot borrow funds on the open market; SFCs would be very firmly placed back into the schools world and possibly lose contact and connections with the wider world of FE; SFCs may lose their distinctiveness and ability to promote the unique brand which is the Sixth Form College; reclassification by the Office for National Statistics back to the public sector would lead to new bureaucracies to bring college accounts into line with the Whole of Government Accounts and wipe out any gains by reductions in MIS and Audit requirement (ibid).

The campaign for better funding for post-16 students continued to be argued across a range of fronts, including pressing for the ability to opt for academy status. Central to the SFCA case was that academy conversion would mean more students could benefit from the SFC model of teaching, learning and support; would enable SFCs to foster much closer relationships with academies and free schools; would deliver educational benefits to a wider group of students through the sharing of expertise and good practice; and deliver financial benefits through shared services and improved purchasing power (Kewin 2015). Following this extended campaign, in November 2015, the Chancellor George Osborne announced that SFCs would be enabled to convert to academy status. SFCA supported individual colleges to prepare applications to the DfE and published a 'Guide to Academisation' (Godfrey 2017).

Following the Chancellor's announcement in the November Budget of 2015, two SFCs became single academy trusts and 17 formed or joined a MAT. (DfE 2015). At the start of 2018 there were 1,324 MATs in total comprising, 305 'empty' MATs, 739 with 2-5 schools, 189 with 6-10 schools, 81 with 11-30 schools, 10 with more than 30 schools.

## THEORETICAL CONTEXT

SFCs, in common with other parts of the school and college sector, are no strangers to rapid and far-reaching institutional and political change. Following incorporation (DfE 1992) the government introduced a Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) with responsibility for strategic direction and quality, monitored via a comprehensive inspection regime. Colleges thus experienced greater internal freedoms in areas of management such as finance, personnel and local strategic direction, whilst at the same time becoming subject to greater external controls through the operations and funding controls exercised by the FEFC (Shorter 1994), as well as an enhanced local competitive market in the absence of the previous local authority-led non advanced and advanced further education planning

arrangements. This process can be seen as a form of ‘decentralised centralism’ (Jopling and Hadfield, 2015:48), a phrase that points to an illusory set of market freedoms commonly held to be achievable through academisation, that are in fact highly constrained by government policy and accountability mechanisms.

Academisation was initially conceived as a panacea for failing schools – based on the common assumption that an academy would, almost by definition, out-perform the LEA school(s) it replaced Mills (2015) - and was underpinned by a common-sense sentiment that independent schools represented a model towards which all other schools should aspire. Thus in their study of the politics of the academies programme, Gunter and McGinty (2014: 302) conclude that ‘the idea of the state-of-the-art independent school, funded by the tax payer but run by private interests, became the main focus of reform’.

National Audit Office reviews (NAO 2007) and government commissioned reports (PWC 2008) of academies that have assessed outcomes using a variety of measures have not found significant gains in student performance attributable to academisation. Academic studies have similarly found no ‘academy effect’. For example, in his study of academies formed between 2002 and 2006, Gorard (2009: 101) found that ‘their level of success in comparison to their predecessors, national averages, their changing compositions and their changing exam entry practices are insubstantial’. And, as Brundrett (2012: 223) has argued, the effect of a more localised management in which schools and school leaders take greater control of education, seems to ‘run counter to all of the international evidence from the ever-growing body of school effectiveness and improvement research which suggests that schools do best when they cooperate.’ For, although MATs rely on their member schools sharing senior personnel and resources, they are highly competitive in terms of other schools and colleges outside their own trust, where ‘Each provider is in competition, to a greater or lesser degree, with other providers, both those offering their own “type” of education and those offering different provision’ (Briggs 2004: 120). To the extent that academisation leads to a more competitive educational environment, it may be one of the most damaging consequences of a market-led school and college system.

The very large number of schools which are centrally funded and accountable to the Secretary of State led to the creation of the role of National Schools Commissioner, overseeing the work of a team of Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs). External accountability of trusts is largely in the hands of the government inspection framework, managed by the Office for Standards In Education (Ofsted), and the RSCs who each oversee a number of trusts in one area. Recent studies have suggested (eg Sedgwick 2016) that neither Ofsted nor the RSC are well suited to enable trusts to develop and flourish as networked partnerships of schools and colleges. As Ehren and Godfrey (2017: 360) surmise, ‘vertical, one-way, top-down forms of accountability are not supportive of the creation of inter-organizational networks that are agile and flexible enough to effect change’. Crucially,



they found that the style of Ofsted inspections, which they characterise as ‘single-member accountability’ was reflected downwards into the leadership and management styles and systems of constituent schools in trusts. Attention was paid to short term fixes to address identified problem areas, ‘creating a culture of short-termism which constrains the development of more sustainable mechanisms for internal quality control to monitor, support and improve all schools over time’ (p 359). Given the considerable impact of poor Ofsted inspection grades upon the viability and sustainability of providers it is therefore unsurprising that college Principals may view entering a trust arrangement, with its reliance upon Inter-organisational and collaborative relationships, with some degree of caution.

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS

We have chosen to structure the core of this article as an exploratory thematic presentation. This decision emerged partly from our analysis of the data derived from questionnaires completed by the Principals or Chairs of 35 SFCs, representing all regions of England and a small number of follow up interviews, which generated five distinct but overlapping themes that seemed to resonate with the majority of our respondents: Autonomy, Funding, Local Circumstances, Strategy and Quality (Author 2018). The approach is consistent with our reading of the relevant theoretical literature, in which we looked at other studies of educational organisational arrangements, particularly different governance and management models. We look at each theme in turn, albeit necessarily quite briefly, and comment on how each one contributed to the sum of Principals’ responses to the academisation agenda. In the discussion that follows we consider some implications of the data and our analysis for policy and practice in the SFC sector.

### Autonomy

With the introduction of incorporation 25 years ago, many college Principals – some of whom welcomed the perceived freedoms that incorporation would bring - expressed concern that their colleges might lose their independence and distinctiveness. As Shorter argued at the time,

Inheriting traditions of academic success, acquiring a pastoral focus from their schools' sector background, adding their own concern with curriculum breadth, sixth-form colleges developed a particular and individual identity. It is clearly the hope of many who work within them that this particular legacy may well pass to the new more entrepreneurial colleges of the future (Shorter 1994: 473).

As the sector has developed and flourished in the new competitive environment, it was unsurprising to us that the single theme returned to again and again by our sample was the question of institutional autonomy. As one Principal put it, the main reason for not academising was 'loss of autonomy – the more we looked into being part of a MAT the more it became clear that strategic decision-making would be at the MAT level and the college's own local governing body would have a secondary role, even if it was the largest institution in the MAT.' This was in many ways unsurprising, since, as Stoten ( 2011: 156) has suggested, 'The traditional model for the school and college sectors was typified by the notion of autonomy, albeit under the aegis of a local authority, and a strong authority figure who led a hierarchical organisation that had clearly defined boundaries and goals.'

Retaining the autonomy of their college was the single most cited reason for rejecting academisation given by the Principals in our study. The quality of governance and management in SFCs, reflected in their overall Ofsted grades (81% Good or Outstanding, 36% Outstanding) resulted in well considered responses to the opportunity to become academies. As self-governing institutions since incorporation in 1992, they had enjoyed greater freedoms than academies. The insistence that SFCs should not be able to become a SAT, but in order to convert must form or join a MAT, reinforced the sense of loss of autonomy and impacted on the decision.

The huge majority (80%) of those choosing to remain incorporated institutions stated they did so to retain their autonomy. This aspect proved to be a major concern for the SFCA, whose leader argued in an interview with us that:

A long term concern, however, is that as colleges become one of a number of institutions in a trust and the Principal of the Sixth Form College leaves, the commitment of the trust directors to the special character of the SFC may be diminished.

(Watkin 2018).

However, not all SFCs concurred with the predominant view that academisation presented a danger for the independence of colleges. The chair of Governors of a successful college summarises the discussion which led to their decision:

At the time that the area-based review was launched it appeared very much that academisation, certainly for the schools sector, was the only game in town. The Corporation saw advantages in being closer to the schools sector and to the RSC in order to influence future decision-making and to be better placed to contribute our own experience and expertise to support local educational developments. This was all the more so given that at about the same time the RSC had taken a number of decisions that benefited local MATs, were against the interests of the SFCs, and, in our

view, were misguided in terms of the quality of local provision. The area based review suggested that over the next decade there would be a considerable rise in demand for 16-18 places in the area. We felt that as an academy or part of a MAT the College would be better placed to bid to set up a 16-19 free school rather than seeing either (a) a bid for such a school coming in from elsewhere or (b) the places going to an ever greater number of school sixth forms.

This foreshadows the related theme of finance, which proved to be the second most commonly cited consideration for Principals considering academisation.

### Funding

The importance of funding to the post-compulsory education sector cannot be over-stated. A study of all 105 SFCs showed 'pressure to compete is induced in all types of provider by a primary need to respond to the funding methodology and to maximise income' (Briggs 2004: 121). A frequently cited benefit for any education provider becoming an academy is the ability to reclaim VAT. However, one Principal took a more balanced view of the financial considerations:

We never thought that the VAT gain alone would be worth the surrender of autonomy and the limitations placed on some potential revenue streams. What the college really needs is capital funding to both extend its accommodation and refurbish the current estate. It appeared that membership of a MAT might provide access to significant capital funds. Finally, over time, it was hoped (but we never really demonstrated) that there would be efficiency gains through economies of scale and the centralisation of services such as IT.

The financial benefit arising from the eligibility to reclaim VAT had been estimated at £300,000-£400,000, but diminishing budgets and the lack of investment in capital works, owing to severe real terms cuts in funding, has made this nearer to £150,000-£200,000 for colleges which were the first to academise (Griffiths 2018). A significant number of colleges felt this did not justify the loss of the ability to borrow and loss of autonomy.

Some colleges had existing loans which would have been too costly to renegotiate on conversion. This Principal was typical in surmising that academisation could seriously restrict future funding options:

Loss of some freedoms, such as the opportunity to raise revenue through international recruitment or HE provision, or indeed to borrow capital commercially. While these might not be immediately possible anyway, the situation might change in the future and once they were gone they could not be reclaimed.

In some cases local circumstances such as the demographic downturn in the year 11 cohort and continued real-terms cuts in funding compounded by the vagaries of the allocation methodology made the VAT dividend a straw to be clutched.

The Principal of a college in this situation said:

Despite being an 'Outstanding' college of over 2000 students the steep demographic reduction in the year 11 cohort in the schools from which we recruit had required us to reduce management and to increase workloads for staff. This had enabled us to maintain our broad curriculum and extensive programme of enrichment but further action would be needed. The primary motive for academisation was therefore additional funding. The college had no outstanding loans and was not delivering HE, apprenticeships or a significant amount of adult work so the conversion process was reasonably straightforward.

The impact of increased competition and demographic changes combine to create a powerful case for seeking an alternative leaner institutional structure. One Principal summarised the position thus:

Two of the schools who joined our trust had small unviable sixth forms. One has now closed whilst the other has upper sixth for the last time this year. It was necessary to pay off a bank loan of over £2 million from the reserves but the VAT benefit has helped us to keep our head above water and we have made additional savings across the trust where one contract has been issued for insurance and audit, a catering contract across three academies in the MAT and a discount for all employees with the local bus company. Because of the size of our trust we also got a school condition allocation that has enabled us to address health and safety issues and invest significantly in one primary school, which would not have happened under local authority control.

This discussion of the relative merits of autonomy and academisation from a financial perspective also introduces our third theme, the centrality of existing local circumstances.

Local circumstances

Local competition presents a significant challenge to a college's leadership and its governance. The theoretical literature points to the crucial impact of local circumstances upon school and college decisions to academise (Mills 2015, Rayner 2018). One Principal expressed a commonly shared concern about the impact that academisation might have upon existing local educational partnerships:

There was a fear that if the college were to identify itself with one MAT, this would alter perceptions of the college in the eyes of students and parents and perhaps, damage relations with some of the other MATs and the schools within them.

In some areas the existing pattern of academies and MATs in the local area militated against an obvious new grouping:

Distorting the pattern of post-16 provision in the local area - although the situation is now more complex than it was a decade ago, with more school sixth forms in existence, the basic structure of the system is that at the age of 16 most of the students attending local secondary schools in the city and surrounding area choose to move on to a Sixth Form College.

A number of SFCs had developed close links with local schools and were reluctant to destabilise these:

We have always had a longstanding relationship with local secondary schools. This led a number of us to seek a more formal relationship where there was more accountability and challenge regarding pupil/student outcomes. It was a natural step to form an academy trust and by this time primary schools were also keen to join us.

This Principal expresses a similar concern about developing close links with a small number of schools in a MAT which could impact on their existing strong relationships with their other contributory schools. The financial and administrative burden of running a MAT deterred a number of colleges from academising, especially as the single academy trust option became no longer possible.

Regional provision is very successful and follows from a carefully planned educational landscape, comprising a mixture of 11-16 schools, FE and SFCs, and a small number of school sixth forms. 90% of the county's schools are judged 'Good' or 'Outstanding' so we operate in a sub-region which is not causing concern to regional school commissioners. The local authority is still well regarded and many schools, particularly primaries, have remained under the auspices of the local authority rather than academizing. A Sixth Form College becoming part of a MAT would risk loss of self-determination, mission creep, increased costs and bureaucracy and

spreading leadership capacity too thinly. The college works in partnership with other local providers to improve quality and performance without formal accountability based on our designation. This approach works well in our context and is welcomed by our partners.

## Strategy

Many Principals guarded preciously the traditional and/or existing strategic direction of their college, and were concerned about the impact that academisation might have upon this in pulling the college away from its mission and purpose. This fourth theme is succinctly expressed by this Principal:

The closer we came to decision-making time, the more we struggled to see a real strategic purpose in joining one of the local MATs. The MAT in question grew by taking in several primary schools, some outside the county, and was in discussions with the RSC about taking on a failing secondary, again outside the county. This rather brought home to us the understanding that the MAT had its own strategic direction and it was not necessarily one to which we could easily contribute.

For one Principal, the considerably uncertain political climate surrounding MATs and the complexity of the development work needed, impacted negatively on the college's ability to carry out effective strategic planning:

Discussions with the new RSC indicated that there was little chance of a successful bid for a new 16-19 free school – it was not a priority for the next 5+ years and our chances of success would not be boosted by joining a MAT. We struggled to get any clarity about access to capital funding for MATs and concluded that, while there might be some gain, there was no guarantee that money for the MAT would mean money for the college if other schools within the MAT were judged to be in greater need. At the same time, the due diligence process, while not throwing up any horrors relating to our potential partners, brought home to us the considerable body of work that would need to be done in order to establish the MAT on a proper footing and then develop it; this work would have been a considerable diversion of resources away from the College's own needs.

In line with many FECs, a number of SFCs deliver higher education, and regard this as an important way of differentiating themselves from schools, which rarely feature a higher education offer. This is not possible as an academy trust without establishing a limited

company. A number of colleges were reluctant to relinquish the income from this aspect of their work.

## Quality

In some cases academisation has already had an impact on quality and patterns of provision. The Principal of a north-west SFC is unreservedly positive on the benefits for the college of forming a MAT:

The main driver for us was to improve performance at key stage 4 which would lead to better progression to the college at a time of lower numbers in secondary schools. Results have improved and more students have progressed to the college from the trust schools as a result. The support we received regarding academy improvement helped us to deliver some of our very best results. Being part of a multi academy trust is enabling us to improve teaching, learning and outcomes for young people in our town whilst we are at the centre of the development of the strategies that drive improvement rather than being a bolt-on and consulted as an afterthought. Forming a MAT has not prevented our working closely with the Sixth Form Colleges in the region.

In contrast, for another Principal the hard won gains achieved as an independent corporation were too valuable to risk giving up by moving to an academy structure:

In our college there is an excellent record of successful financial management, institutional growth and mature, high quality governance. In these circumstances an independent corporation is in my view the best body to oversee the Sixth Form College, its finances, strategic direction and quality.

However, one Principal noted that the political tide was beginning to move away from academisation as a panacea for improving quality:

By the time we made our decision the academisation tide had distinctly ebbed. The government had backed off compulsory academy status for all, it was / is becoming apparent that MATs are not a panacea and that some of them can fail schools every bit as badly as some Local Authorities were deemed to have done in the past.

Arguably, the popularity of MATs as a form of school and college organisation was bolstered by a growing interest in the concept of 'system leadership' in education, which has been described in the schools context as 'a head- teacher or senior teacher who works directly for

the success and well-being of students in other schools as well as his own' (Higham et al., 2009:2). A key feature of the system leadership idea is that it extends the line of accountability for quality beyond the school (or college) walls and thus can therefore take scrutiny away from intra-school (or intra-college) systems and arrangements. As one Principal in our study observed, 'it is possible to argue the system leadership agenda being pursued by government is a fig leaf for politicians to demonstrate that they are taking action to improve under-performing schools in an era of public spending cuts, and should not be adhered to slavishly as the only game in town'.

## DISCUSSION

Notwithstanding the arguments against conversion, a significant number of colleges (24% of the sector) have opted to become academies. In our survey, the most commonly cited reasons for doing so were: to reclaim VAT (81%), to collaborate more effectively with partner schools (73%), to benefit from economies of scale (69%) and to improve the quality of the college (69%). Only a very small minority stated that local competition was an issue and in only a single case was the most important reason for academising cited to prevent a school sixth form opening or to avoid merger with an FE college. This suggests that the overriding reason for academising was financial, and a number of colleges seem to have been prepared to give up some autonomy for the opportunity to reclaim VAT.

Local rather than regional factors would seem to have had a greater influence on decisions. The fact that no London college has academised is perhaps explained by their relatively higher funding compared with other regions, their very strong existing links with colleges and partner schools, the provision of free transport within the city and the lack of a demographic down-turn which has had a large impact on many colleges outside large metropolitan areas. In certain areas a well-established group of SFCs had existing strong links with a large number of schools and felt the formation of more formal links with schools would not add further value.

The administrative burden associated with the conversion process was not seen as a major factor in determining choices. Only two colleges opting to remain autonomous cited the added administrative burden of being an academy as a major factor and none identified the application process itself as a disincentive. Colleges in our survey suggested the process was generally relatively easy but time-consuming. The most problematic issues were changing finance systems (62% stating this was difficult) and renegotiating loans (83% of colleges, where this was required, stating this was difficult). The most significant burden inevitably fell on finance directors, with 94% stating their workload had increased significantly.

The extent to which academies represent a loss of democratic control and accountability is a recurring theme in the theoretical literature, and indeed loss of autonomy proved a very



common concern amongst our sample of college Principals. However, trusts vary greatly in character, size and complexity, and whilst school heads and college Principals may view academisation as inevitable, as Keddie (2016: 170) found in her study, many placed high significance on 'network arrangements that supported a sense of ownership, a common purpose, shared responsibility for students and their learning and relations of trust.'

Hargreaves (2011: 689), drawing on Weick's (1976) model of loose coupling in educational organisations, has usefully characterised different forms of networks on a continuum of 'loose-to-tight', such that MATs with a chain of schools (that can be up to 70 in number) and single board of directors accountable for each school in the trust could represent a 'tight' network, whereas a smaller locally based single academy trust or a smaller MAT, perhaps consolidating existing network partnership arrangements, might represent a 'loose' network.

However this has played out locally, there is now some good national level evidence that 'the new patterns of governance within the current system have both created and closed down opportunities for autonomy or agency, empowering some, while disempowering others' (Keddie 2016: 173, see also Woods and Simkins 2014). This is an expression of what Rayner et al (2018: 156) have fittingly characterised as an autonomy paradox, in which 'The rhetoric about freedom from LA control is countered by the fact that membership of a MAT entails new controls and accountabilities'. As we have seen, these concerns certainly resonated with our sample of SFC Principals, and seem to have significantly impacted upon their decision whether or not to embrace academisation.

The growth in the formation of multi-academy trusts has resulted in head teachers and, more recently, college Principals assuming the role of executive leaders. Amongst our sample, the most commonly identified development issues facing Principals in this position were governance structures; achieving the right balance between autonomy and centralisation; the role of the MAT and executive Principal in institutional improvement; strategic planning and leadership of a MAT as opposed to a college; risk assessing the rationale and growth of a MAT; quality assurance and assessment of the MAT; and the role of MATs in initial teacher training and teaching schools.

## CONCLUSION

We believe that further evaluations by the DfE and Ofsted on whether the academisation agenda is bringing about improvements in educational outcomes should include an investigation of the impact on SFCs. In the medium term, SFCs involved in MATs should be treated as part of the SFC sector with regard to aggregating data on performance of the sector as a whole. It is clear that the significant gap in per capita funding for 16-19 students

compared with 11-16 students has not been addressed by the ability of academised colleges to reclaim VAT. Only a minority of the sector will benefit and for those that do so, the financial benefit is outweighed by continued funding cuts. In addition, colleges in MATs have not received funding for the quality improvement strategies they are implementing. The recent announcement of a partial contribution to the teachers' pay award and a modest one-off Capital allocation to schools (HM Treasury 2018) included the academised SFCs. The capital allocation but not the pay award contribution was later extended to incorporated SFCs following extensive lobbying by the SFCA, who also argued that urgent and significant increases in the basic funding rate would still be required to deliver the government's learning and skills agenda.

Principals and governing bodies of SFCs require the fullest range of evidence to inform their decision making with regard to academisation. The theoretical literature is consistently clear about the implications for college autonomy. Whilst academisation brings certain freedoms, these are balanced – possibly not equally – by a number of constraints, especially in the case of MATs which may have established sets of procedures and an overarching ethos that may push against well-considered pre-existing arrangements.

It is clear, both from the weight of evidence in the theoretical literature, and from our case study, that there is a considerable tension at the heart of academisation for SFCs. Despite this, a significant number of colleges have opted to academise, although three times more have, to date, resisted. Future research is needed that relates specifically to the SFC sector, that explores the experience of colleges that have academised. In particular, no work to date has investigated the impact of academisation upon the student learning experience, and whether the concerns of those Principals who have chosen not to academise are well founded. Future research will also seek evidence on whether any SFC's have become academies and subsequently regretted it. The closing down of the single academy trust option for colleges brings into sharp focus the potential impact of sometimes very large academy chains upon the autonomy and strategic integrity of individual member colleges. Our study suggests that those leading Sixth Form Colleges should consider very carefully the academy option. In our view, there is an urgent need for further work on post 16 education generally including the implications of academisation for education policy and practice and its impact upon learning, teaching and the wider student experience, and the school improvement agenda, particularly supporting small school sixth forms as adumbrated by the Minister for Schools, Nic Boles MP (2014), and whether the concerns of those Principals who have chosen not to academise are well founded. Future research will also seek evidence on whether any SFC's have become academies and subsequently regretted it. The closing down of the single academy trust option for colleges brings into sharp focus the potential impact of sometimes very large academy chains upon the autonomy and strategic integrity of individual member colleges. Our study suggests that those leading Sixth Form Colleges should consider very carefully the academy option. In our view, there is an urgent need for further work on post 16 education generally including the implications of academisation for

education policy and practice and its impact upon learning, teaching and the wider student experience.

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