Title	Academies: research into the leadership of sponsored and converting academies
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Who should read it?	Heads, chairs and governors considering conversion to an Academy; Co-ordinators of Governor Services
Why?	There is very little unbiased, evidence-based information on academies apart from this document. It will inform any debate on academy status and its implications
Summary	**This is the report of a research project commissioned by the National College into established and recently converted academies in order to understand what is distinctive about leading a successful academy and the conversion journey.** **Stage 1**: an overview of academy policy and research studies and 15 interviews with key national stakeholders. **Stage 2**: 20 case studies of sponsored and converting academies and interviews with 78 senior and middle leaders (including governors); two surveys, one with all sponsored academies and the other with all converting academies. **Stage 3**: detailed analysis of the policy and research studies, the case studies and the survey data. **Key findings and conclusions** *The importance of academy context* Independence and autonomy are key motivating factors for both sponsored and converting academies, but for different reasons. The challenge for sponsored academies was that with their new freedoms and additional resources came enormous pressure to achieve rapid improvement. For leaders in converting academies the challenges were largely administrative and procedural, and were not linked to pupil outcomes…academy status was viewed as an opportunity to gain or regain autonomy from the local authority rather than an opportunity to do things radically differently. **Sponsorship, governance and the local authority** *Sponsorship*

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Sponsored academies tended to believe that sponsors added value in many ways. Leaders in converting academies were generally averse to the involvement of a sponsor and in some cases converting academies viewed the involvement of a sponsor as a replacement of the local authority.

Governance

The governance structure for sponsored academies radically changed with academy status. For example, for academies with chain sponsorship there are two tiers of governance (one operating at a central level for all academies within the chain and a separate governing body for each academy). This was reported to have resulted in sharper scrutiny of performance. Governors in these schools played a key role in setting and communicating their new school vision. However, there was little change in the composition, structure and roles of the governing body in converting academies though governors recognised that they had taken on more responsibility for accountability. Converting academies started from a higher base in terms of the skills and attributes of governors already in place.

The local authority(LA)

Almost half of sponsored academy respondents said their relationship with the LA had weakened since becoming an academy. The shift in power was less evident for converting academies, many of which already had a more distant relationship prior to becoming an academy. Most believed that their LA should have some degree of engagement with their academy. A large proportion said they will continue to buy in at least some of the services previously provided by the LA.

Collaboration with other schools

Academy status has had little impact on the nature and degree of collaboration for either type of academy. Few schools, including those that are national support schools (NSSs), had plans to reduce the amount of collaboration they undertook. Leaders in primary schools expressed an interest in not only maintaining current levels of collaboration but in expanding their networks with other schools.

Leading an academy

Strategic leadership

There were some similarities in the vision and values of both

sponsored and converting academies in that leaders in both academy types strive for every child to achieve its full potential. The key difference, however, was the starting-point in terms of pupil attainment. For many sponsored academies, where attainment had previously been low, raising the aspirations and ambitions of pupils featured strongly in their vision and values statement. For a significant proportion of converting academies, many of which were already high achieving, their vision was to be recognised and have the freedom to develop as a high-quality provider of education.

Organisational leadership

Sponsored academies had put in place a number of leadership strategies to improve the quality of learning and learning outcomes. This had been effective in helping to raise standards. There was a business-like feel to how they operated. Senior leadership was more directive in order to drive school improvement. Most converting academies were already high achieving and academy status will have little impact on roles and responsibilities of middle leaders but increased financial autonomy will have an impact on the roles and responsibilities of senior leaders.

Commentary

As the government continues to promote academy status aggressively, including forcing under-performing schools to become academies, there is a dearth of reliably unbiased guidance for heads and governors on the pros and cons. This document is one of the few that offer something other than Tigger-like optimistic celebration or Eeyore-like negativity.

The facts:

- 1244 schools have applied to be an academy since June 2010
- 831 of these applications have been approved
- 430 have converted and are now open, inc 99 primary and no special schools
- The total number of open Academies, including those opened under the previous government, stands at 704

(up to end of June 2011)

In perspective:

- There are 3127 secondary schools and 16971 primary schools in England
- 3.5% of all schools are academies
- 0.6% of all primary schools are academies

The report is measured and wary in its judgements because, by its own admission, the majority of academies at the time the research was conducted were the old-style sponsored kind and very few were converters. Inevitably, the first tranche of converters were likely to be the least critical of their new status, having pursued it most avidly. Also, the researchers take what these schools say about themselves and their motivations at face value, since there is little evidence against which to measure their statements.

It may be seen by some as a rather dry and academic study, and one written to meet the needs of the National College, who commissioned it but it is worth persisting with.

For governors, the most immediately interesting section is that dealing with **governance issues** (pp21-22; 43-45) but there are useful summaries of:

- the **background**, including the growth of the academies movement (pp10-1; 19-20)
- the difference between **sponsored and converting academies** (pp29-30)
- **reasons** for becoming an academy (pp32-33)
- the **challenges** and the journey to academy status (pp33-34) and
- **relationships with the local authority** (pp45-49)

Amongst the 9 **case studies,** two (p37 [primary]; p38 [secondary]) help to illustrate the idiosyncrasy of each academy – no two are identical – and governors should be able to use a case study as an example that is not too different from the school in which they serve, in order to aid discussion of academy status within their governing body.

The latter part of the report focuses on **leadership** issues. The version of school leadership favoured by the authors (including the well-respected John Dunford, ex-ASCL supremo) might be seen to exclude governance but the section on strategic leadership is written in terms that suggest it is fully integrated and, therefore, it is unnecessary to single it out by name. There is some evidence that academy status leads to a more distributed leadership model, a necessary antidote to the suspicion that it encourages more hero-head thinking.

Not surprisingly, the authors conclude that there are many **training and development** needs for leaders in academies and first on the list is "training and research to support governance/sponsorship", including training for chairs of governors.

More like this	"Becoming an Academy" (DfE 2011) www.education.gov.uk "Academy status toolkit" (NCOGS 2010) www.ncogs.org.uk

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★	Don't waste your time
★★	Read only if you've nothing better to do
★★★	Skim read
★★★★	Well worth reading
★★★★★	Essential reading