CHAIN EFFECTS 2018

The impact of academy chains on low-income pupils

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Contents

Foreword

The academy programme was launched in 2000 to turn around failing schools that served students from some of the nation's poorest communities. By assisting these schools with the support of philanthropic, educational and business partners, the intention was to improve the lives of young people from the least privileged backgrounds.

There are now over 7,500 academies in England, more than a third of all schools. In the secondary sector, academies and free schools comprise the vast majority of schools. Of these, about two thirds are schools, often among the more successful, that have 'converted' to gain academy status. The remaining third are 'sponsored' academies, which conform more to the original purpose of the academy project: to improve the fortunes of the UK's most under-performing schools.

The Sutton Trust's *Chain Effects* series has been crucial in drawing attention to how the sponsored academies programme has served the interests of disadvantaged pupils across the country. It specifically looks at academies in 'chains', who share a sponsor, the government's preferred model. Since the first edition in 2014, it has posed the question of whether sponsors are actually having a positive effect on the schools in their chains.

With increased political attention to the topic, it is a natural time to take stock of the academies programme, its strengths, and its weaknesses. This, the final edition in the current series, gives an overview of academies policy to date, and its future direction. We have consistently highlighted that while many of these chains have had a profound impact on the schools they have taken over, many others continue to lag behind national averages. This year's report is no different. Too many chain sponsors, despite several years in charge of their schools, continue to struggle to improve the outcomes of their most disadvantaged students.

This issue is particularly crucial, as our research earlier this year has shown, academy chains now dominate the opening of new free schools, the government's flagship school model. This raises real issues about the capacity of academy and free schools policy to deliver on lofty ambitions. If we are to give every pupil the best chance of a good education, we need a much greater consistency in school quality. In order to achieve this, it is essential that we see better exchange of information and practice from the most successful chains, to those who continue to perform poorly.

Our *Chain Effects* reports have helped to create a new transparency around academy chains, and this year's report provides a fitting overview. I am extremely grateful to Professors Merryn Hutchings and Becky Francis for all their work on the *Chain Effects* series over the past five years.

Sir Peter Lampl

Founder of the Sutton Trust and Chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation

Executive summary

Sponsor-led academies have been promoted by successive governments as a way to improve the educational achievement of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. As the academies programme has developed, policymakers have increasingly seen academy chains, and especially multi-academy trusts (MATs) as the best way of working to improve the performance of previously struggling schools and the educational outcomes of their often disadvantaged pupils. While the DfE now reports annually on MAT performance, a welcome development, there has been less attention to outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, the original focus of the sponsored academies programme.

The *Chain Effects* annual reports address this gap, and remain the only analysis of the effectiveness of this policy strategy in impacting positively on the attainment of disadvantaged young people. This, the fifth and final report in the series, uses 2017 Key Stage 4 exam results and reviews findings over the five years.

We include chains in our analysis only if they had at least three academies in 2017, and at least two secondary sponsored academies for a three-year period from September 2013. Academies are only included if they have been with the same sponsor since September 2014, so that there has been time for the sponsor to have some impact on performance. The report reviews outcomes for disadvantaged secondary pupils across a range of measures including Progress 8 and Attainment 8.

The analysis reveals:

- There continues to be very significant variation in outcomes for disadvantaged pupils, both between and within chains. In 2017, disadvantaged pupils in 12 out of 58 chains had attainment above the national average for disadvantaged pupils in all mainstream schools, including three chains which were substantially above that average. However, 38 of the 58 had attainment below the mainstream average, including 8 which were well below average.

- This diversity, and the larger group that are lower performing, reflects our consistent findings. It is also important to note that this mainstream average for disadvantaged pupils is precisely what the sponsored academies programme was envisaged to outperform.

- The five year analysis shows that there has been only limited change in the overall ranking of the chains in the analysis. The same small group of chains consistently outperform the national average for disadvantaged pupils, while another small group of chains remain at the bottom of the table each year, and there is little to suggest that the Regional Schools Commissioners are having any success in bringing about improvement in these chains. A small number of chains have shown consistent year on year improvement in the ranking, demonstrating that change is possible, while some others have fallen or fluctuated.

- The chains that have joined the analysis group after the first year (when their academies first met the criteria above) have performed less well than on their first year of entry than those already in the group, with almost 8 out of 10 having below average results. This suggests both that it may take more than three years to bring about improvement in an under-performing school, and also that it takes time for a new academy chain to develop effective strategies for improving schools. There is little evidence of effective sharing of knowledge between more and less effective chains – though

when this does take place (as in the case of Outwood Grange and SPTA/Delta), improvement in results follows.

- Those chains that were most successful with disadvantaged pupils also tended to be successful with their more affluent pupils, while less successful chains tended to have poor results for both groups.

- The five-year analysis shows that, in comparison to the national pattern, the overall performance of disadvantaged pupils in sponsored academies in our analysis worsened slightly from 2013 to 2016, but is now recovering. This may be because the move to a more academic curriculum has been a major shift in focus for sponsored academies, many of which previously entered their students for a wide range of vocational qualifications. This change in focus has had implications for staffing and resources, and has taken place at a time when schools have suffered from falling budgets.

- In the last two years the sponsored academies in our analysis have performed very much better against the floor standard. The change from a standard based on attainment to one based on pupil progress has clearly been beneficial for this group. Indeed, considering only the 26 chains that have been consistently part of the analysis, they had a smaller percentage of schools below the floor standard than was the case nationally. Many of their pupils enter with low attainment, and despite good progress through secondary, do not attain well at GCSE.

- Chains have responded in different ways to the new accountability measures, with some prioritising entry in all English Baccalaureate (EBacc) subjects, while others have focused on achieving good Attainment 8 and Progress 8 results without filling all the EBacc slots. This can reflect not entering pupils for languages. Previous research evidence has suggested that disadvantaged pupils in schools that have made the change to EBacc subjects very early were more likely to achieve English and maths GCSEs and to progress in education or employment. However, this pattern is not immediately in evidence among the academy chains; high EBacc entry is not related to improvement in the percentage achieving English and maths.

- The numbers of disadvantaged pupils being entered for EBacc, compared to those achieving this collection of GCSE passes, is a cause for concern in many chains. Research evidence supports the importance of credentials in these subjects for future access to professional routes and careers, yet failure magnifies disadvantage for these pupils, and these factors must be carefully balanced in exam entry.

- Over the last year, re-brokering academies has become a more standard practice, and the early results show that this may be effective. However, there is much still to do to ensure that the promise of the policy programme is realised in improving the educational experiences and outcomes for disadvantaged children.

The 2017 results suggest that overall, sponsored academy chains are beginning to improve in relation to national figures. It is important that they have a period of stability to bed in the curriculum changes that they have had to make, and that during this period they have sufficient funding to do this. But it remains the case that there is a huge disparity among the chains. A small number continue to achieve impressive outcomes for their disadvantaged students against a range of measures, demonstrating the transformational impact on life chances that can be made.

However, a larger group of low-performing chains are achieving results that are not improving and may be harming the prospects of their disadvantaged students. There is little evidence that sufficient action is being taken to enable these chains to improve, or that the considerable knowledge base about how to improve struggling schools is being effectively passed on to new and underperforming chains. We repeat our call for further analysis and learning from successful chains (and other successful groups of schools), and for opportunities to be created for school groups to learn from each other.

Recommendations

To maintain the impetus for improvement:

1. **Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs) must act more firmly with chains that do not deliver improvement over time**, in order to ensure that pupils' life chances are being supported rather than harmed. To this end, the government must recognise the challenge of limited capacity in the system and allow RSCs to draw on *all* providers with good track records of successful public education delivery, including, where appropriate, successful local authorities.

2. **Ofsted should be empowered to undertake formal inspections of academy chains**, and to make judgements on their provision, based on clear criteria. This goes significantly further than the summary evaluations currently being developed. We also suggest that the long-term underperformance of some chains may indicate the limited capacity of the present system – including the RSC structure, and availability of high quality sponsorship – to realise necessary change. It may be necessary to re-visit the present unsustainable complexity of the 'middle tier', in order to better support holistic system improvement.

3. **The Government, along with the National and Regional Schools Commissioners should do more to create mechanisms to ensure the spread of good practice from the best academy chains to the rest.** The successes of many academy chains in effectively supporting pupils with low prior attainment should be celebrated and used as a resource for the rest of the system. This could include commissioning robust research on governance, structural arrangements, leadership, and teaching practice in chains that are providing transformational outcomes to their disadvantaged students, to analyse what enables them to succeed.

To support pupil-level attainment:

4. **Sponsors and schools should make full use of the body of evidence on what works to improve pupil outcomes.** For schools themselves, there is growing evidence on the most effective strategies for school improvement, including the Sutton Trust/Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Teaching and Learning Toolkit, which focuses on effective strategies to improve results for disadvantaged students.

5. **There should be continued efforts to increase teacher supply in academic subjects where there are currently shortages**, and strategies should be devised to ensure that struggling schools are able to recruit subject specialists.

6. **Research should be commissioned to determine whether or not the increase in the proportion of pupils entering all EBacc subjects is resulting in some pupils failing (gaining less than a standard pass) in multiple subjects.** The target of 90% of pupils entering EBacc by 2025 should be reviewed in the light of this evidence. In the meantime, schools should reflect on their subject entry and outcome rates for disadvantaged pupils, and ensure that their practices are serving the best interests of the young people concerned.

7. **The government should recognise that schools alone cannot solve the challenges of social inequality;** especially not as gaps widen for families. There needs to be recognition that schools are increasingly being expected to compensate other gaps in social provision, and that educational improvement and narrowing of gaps is hampered in these circumstances.

1. Introduction

Within the space of a few years, academy schools spread from being a bespoke intervention to representing the vast majority of secondary schools, and a growing proportion of primaries. The programme was originally aimed at transforming the lives of disadvantaged pupils.[1] So has it worked? The *Chain Effects* series of reports[2] has aimed to analyse the impact of academy chains on disadvantaged pupils in sponsored academies.[3] This is the fifth and final report in the series, and reviews findings over the last four years as well as presenting the 2017 data.

When we started in 2013, there were no published tables of chains' performance. Since then both DfE and the Education Policy Institute have produced such tables, but ours remains the only analysis with a specific focus on disadvantaged pupils in sponsored academies.[4] Disadvantaged pupils in England consistently achieve less well than their more affluent peers. In 2017, just 46.4% of disadvantaged pupils attained Grade 4 or better in both English and mathematics GCSEs, compared with 72% of more affluent pupils. This gap has narrowed slightly; in 2011 the gap was 28.5%, whereas in 2017 it was 25.6%. A similar narrowing is shown in the DfE's disadvantage gap index.[5]

There is a gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers on entry to school and this widens through the years of schooling. While many factors both in and outside of the classroom contribute to this gap (see for example, the Sutton Trust's *Parent Power* reports[6]), the government focus has been on the role of schools, and the creation of sponsored academies was one strategy to raise disadvantaged pupils' attainment.

The *Chain Effects* reports refer to *chains* of academies rather than multi-academy trusts (MATs). We use chain to mean a group of at least three academies with the same sponsor. Such groupings are not necessarily synonymous with MATs. Some chains include more than one MAT, and some MATs comprise only a single school.

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[1] This intention was embedded at the start of the programme, which focused on revitalising schools in high-deprivation areas; but was also regularly reiterated by the DfE throughout the programme's expansion (see for analysis Academies Commission, 2013; Francis, 2018).

[2] Hutchings, Francis & De Vries, 2014; Hutchings, Francis & Kirby, 2015; Hutchings, Francis & Kirby, 2016, Hutchings & Francis, 2017.

[3] Disadvantaged pupils are those who have been eligible for Free School Meals at any time during the last 6 years, and those in care.

[4] e.g. DfE, 2018a, Andrews, 2018a, Andrews et al 2017.

[5] DfE 2018b.

[6] Francis & Hutchings, 2013; Montacute & Cullinane, 2018.

2. Policy background

Origin and development of the academies programme

The academies programme was initiated by the Labour Government in 2000, with the opening of the first 'City Academies' in 2002. These academies replaced secondary schools located in areas of social deprivation with a history of underperformance. Each academy was sponsored by a philanthropist or business partner, keen to make a difference to the lives of poor children and young people in deprived areas. The ambitious vision and business acumen of the sponsor were seen as key in establishing an ambitious new school. The new academies had start-up funds and freedoms to vary the curriculum, school year, staff pay and conditions of service.[7]

As the programme grew, a wider range of sponsors were involved (including universities, charities and even schools) and start-up funding was abolished. Nevertheless, the continued commitment to resourcing struggling schools in areas of social deprivation as a means to address social justice was clear.[8] By 2010, when the Coalition government was elected, the number of sponsor-led academies had increased to 203, still comprising a bespoke, albeit significant, policy experiment.

This focus on revitalising England's lowest performing schools was diluted with the Coalition's drive to turn many of the most successful schools into academies through its 'conversion' programme. [9] The increased focus on school autonomy arguably trumped the original promotion of social redistribution, as it was now many of the best schools – where more advantaged children tend to be concentrated – that gained as a result of generous funding arrangements and autonomy.[10] The academy programme had previously been limited to secondary schools, but now primary and special schools could also become academies. In addition, new schools have to be 'free schools' – which are academies under a different label.[11] Nevertheless, the Coalition simultaneously enacted its pledge to maintain and significantly develop the sponsored academy programme; schools identified as underperforming or 'failing' had to become academies. And the original impetus to improve the life chances of disadvantaged pupils remained the articulated rationale for this approach.[12]

Subsequently, the Conservative government (elected in 2015) set out its intention to make all schools in England become academies, but this was dropped in the face of opposition. However, measures to increase the rate of conversion were incorporated in the 2016 Education and Adoption Act.

Since then, academisation has been less prominent in the political agenda, but the number of both sponsored and converter academies has continued to rise (see Figure 1). Some 66% of secondary schools and 29% of primary schools were academies by August 2018.

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[7] Academies Commission, 2013, p.21-22.
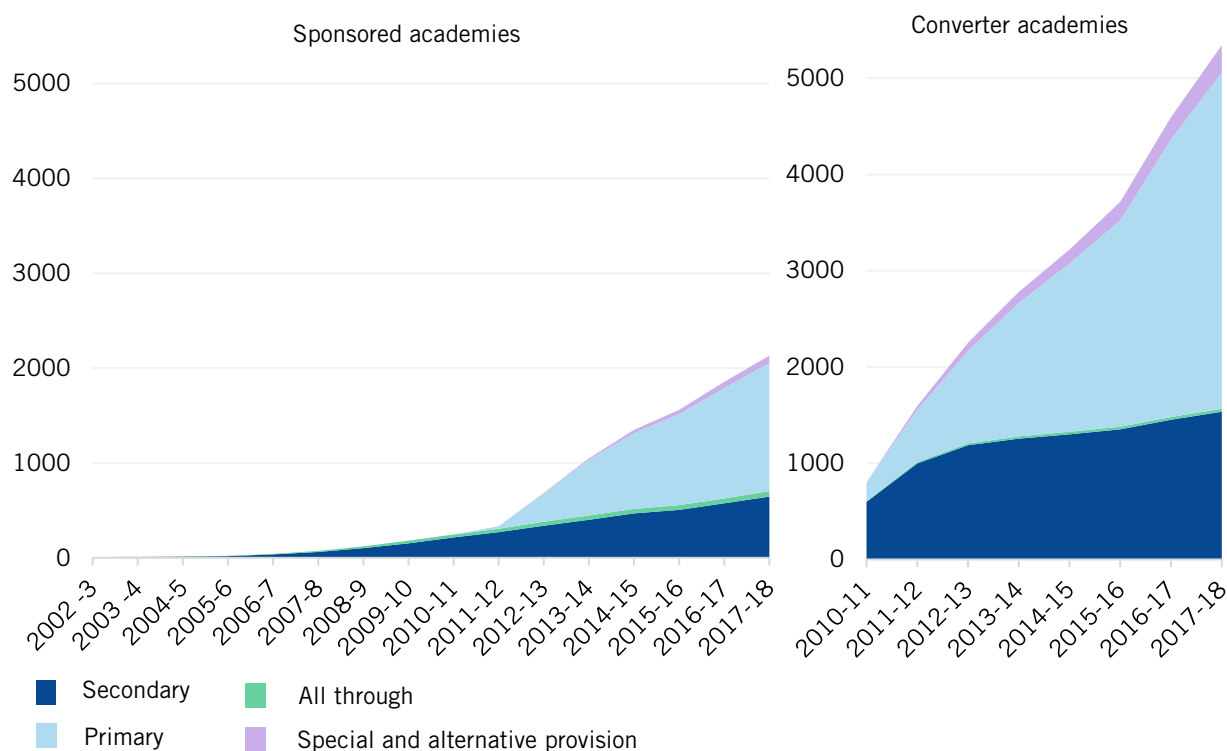[8] Adonis, 2012; Mahony & Hextall, 2012.
[9] Academies Act, 2010. Initially, only school graded by Ofsted as Outstanding could convert, but from April 2011, all schools 'performing well' could apply.
[10] Francis, 2010; Academies Commission, 2013.
[11] Around four out of five of the Free Schools created since 2015 have been created by academy trusts, Garry et al, 2018.
[12] See DfE, 2014b.

Figure 1: The growth in numbers of academies 2002-18

Source: DfE 2018c. The chart shows the dates of opening of all academies listed in August 2018.

Sponsors, and the development of academy chains and trusts

The early academies were to be sponsored by businesses, churches or other faith groups, voluntary bodies or individuals who would contribute £2 million, with the rest of the funding coming from the Department. They would be able to name the academy after themselves, and dictate the curriculum. Difficulties in finding sponsors meant that the financial contribution was reduced, and there was less focus on individual business people and philanthropists as potential sponsors; substantial organisations such as universities, charities and even some local authorities were encouraged to set up academies. Limited sponsor capacity and educational expertise was thus established as an issue very early on.[13]

Relatively early in the academies programme it became apparent that 'stand-alone' academies – those single schools with an individual sponsor – showed mixed success and were more likely to achieve poor outcomes. There was a risk of isolation impacting detrimentally on practice. The potential benefits of sponsor organisations operating as 'chains' (with a central organisation sponsoring and applying their model to more than one school) were increasingly identified.[14] These organisations, often with substantial existing infrastructure and resources, were seen as bringing expertise and resource to sponsorship, and mitigating some of the risks associated with individual sponsors. Sponsored academy chains were a lynchpin of Coalition academies policy, with encouragement to existing sponsors to take on more schools, and later through the encouragement of school-led sponsorship.[15]

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[13] Hill, 2010.
[14] Hill, 2010; Hill et al, 2012; DfE, 2012.
[15] See e.g. DfE, 2010.

Some converter academies have joined chains which originally consisted entirely of sponsored academies. Other converters have grouped together in multi-academy trusts. Table 1 shows the position in August 2018, when 70% of all academies were in trusts of three or more schools. This percentage has increased from 55% two years earlier and only 35% in 2010. The number of stand-alone academies has fallen in the last two years, but over half the trusts still consist of a single academy.

Table 1: Academies in trusts and size of trusts

Trust size	Academies	% Academies	Trusts	% Trusts
1	1,596	21.4%	1,596	59.6%
2	612	8.2%	306	11.4%
3-5	1,746	23.4%	466	17.4%
6-10	1,515	20.3%	204	7.6%
11-20	993	13.3%	75	2.8%
21-30	459	6.1%	18	0.7%
31-40	263	3.5%	8	0.3%
41+	291	3.9%	6	0.2%
Total	7,475	100%	2,679	100%

Source: DFE, 2018c.

Many chains were actively encouraged to expand rapidly in the early years of the Coalition government, as a result of the vast increase in numbers of academies. However, capacity challenges became evident around 2014, with some chains prevented from further expansion and other having academies removed because they had not improved. The size and number of larger chains has shown little change in the last few years, but there has been a substantial increase in the number of chains with 3 or more schools (Table 1 shows there were 777 in August 2018; in June 2014 there were just 192).

Academy organisation and infrastructure

As the number of academies has increased, the arrangements to support them have also developed. The government promoted the multi-academy trust (MAT) as the best structure for academy chains, and now all academies are in MATs or single academy trusts. Academy trusts are accountable for the performance of each of their academies.

In 2014, eight Regional Schools Commissioners were appointed, each supported and advised by a Headteacher Board and line managed by the National Schools Commissioner. Their remit currently includes taking decisions on the creation of new converter and sponsored academies, matching schools to sponsors; ensuring there are enough high quality sponsors to meet local need; and monitoring academy and maintained school performance and where necessary, intervening.[16]

One form of intervention for under-performing academies is to 're-broker' them – that is, move them to another trust. The first re-brokerage was in 2012. The MAT taking on the re-brokered academy receives a grant sum. Between March 2013 and March 2018, 2.4% of all academies have moved from one trust to another with a payment involved (presumably indicating re-brokering). A further 5.8% have changed

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[16] Foster & Long, 2017.

trusts without payment. The percentage moving trusts has increased each year to 3.3% in 2017-18.[17] Two academies have each changed trust twice within three years.[18]

Impact of academisation on attainment

It is not possible to say with any accuracy how attainment has changed over time, because the examinations pupils take, the way they are graded, and the key performance measures for schools have changed. This means that the main way of assessing changes in performance is by comparing attainment between groups of schools at different dates. Inevitably this is to some extent measuring which schools have adapted most quickly to the new measures in place.

Overall, studies of the impact of the academies programme show little difference between the performance of academies and local authority maintained schools.[19] However, the various league tables that have been produced all indicate that some academy trusts perform better than others.[20] The Education Policy Institute recently argued that 'what matters most is being in a high performing school group, not being in an academy rather than a local authority maintained school or vice-versa.'[21] Another indication of differences between academy trusts is the re-brokering programme. If academies improve when they are moved to other trusts, this suggests that some factor in the working of the trust may be responsible for the improvement. It is as yet early days to investigate this but there are indications that moving schools between trusts does appear to be associated with some positive outcomes.[22]

It remains a concern that some under-performing schools have not improved despite becoming academies. Ofsted have drawn attention to a group of 140 schools that have repeatedly been identified in inspections as requiring improvement, but have not improved. Of these, 52 schools are currently academies and 29 of these are in MATs. A common factor among these schools is that they have a high percentage of disadvantaged pupils.[23]

Some studies have focused particularly on whether the sponsored academy programme, in which under-performing schools become academies, has been successful in improving the performance of those schools. Analysis undertaken by LSE researchers has shown that the pre-2010 sponsored academies have improved, but that the impact on post-2010 sponsored and converter academies has been very limited.[24] The fact that some academies continue to underperform (and that re-brokering is now routine) makes it clear that academisation is not the panacea that it was intended to be.

Our Chain Effects series of reports has focused on the impact of academisation on disadvantaged pupils in sponsored academies – the main target group of the original programme. We have found that government claims that academisation has transformed the performance of disadvantaged pupils are only true for a small number of academy trusts.[25] Our findings over the five years are set out in detail later in this report.

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[17] DfE, 2018d.
[18] Carter, 2017.
[19] e.g. Andrews, 2018.
[20] e.g. DfE, 2018a; Andrews et al, 2017; Andrews 2018a.
[21] Andrews, 2018a, p.9.
[22] Andrews, 2018b.
[23] Ofsted, 2017; Spielman, 2018a.
[24] Andrews et al, 2017.
[25] e.g. DfE, 2013, 2014b, 2015.

Other current issues

Sponsors: number and quality

The DfE has reported that there is a risk of there being an insufficient number of high quality sponsors and MATs available to support underperforming schools.[26] A DfE survey in 2016 found limited capacity to support additional schools over the next three years, and in January 2018, 95 sponsors had asked not to take on more schools because they lacked capacity, and a further 12 sponsors had been 'paused' because of educational, financial or governance concerns. This shortage affects some regions more than others.[27]

The difficulty in finding sponsors has increased the time it takes between being judged Inadequate and opening as an academy. NAO report an average wait of 18 months. Another factor here is the unwillingness of trusts to take on certain schools, for example, those with severe problems, those that are geographically isolated, and those with financial issues such as PFI contracts. One school has waited seven years for a trust to accept it, and four others have waited three years. In each case the delay has been caused by PFI contracts.[28] Ironically, given the original intention of the academies programme, many of these 'SNOWs' (Schools No-one Wants) are in areas of social deprivation.[29]

The quality of sponsors is also an issue. In the light of the findings of our earlier reports, we have consistently recommended that Ofsted should be empowered to undertake formal inspections of academy chains. Similar calls have come from the Ofsted Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman and her predecessor Sir Michael Wilshaw, and from the Education Select Committee.[30] Yet this has not happened, and remains an ongoing concern. Amanda Spielman, Chief Inspector, recently described this situation as 'untenable', arguing that much decision-making now sits at the level of the trust, not just on financial and employment matters, but in determining curriculum, teaching and assessment.[31] We therefore welcome Ofsted's recent announcement that their inspections of academies within a MAT will be followed by a visit to the MAT Head office.[32]

In a similar vein, Sir David Carter, the then National Schools Commissioner, proposed a system of 'health checks' for MATs. These have been piloted as a system of peer review in which the Chief Executive of a large MAT visits a smaller MAT for three days to give advice. This could result in welcome sharing of information but does not necessarily provide a check on quality.

MAT strategies for success

The current accountability structures and sanctions inevitably encourage schools to try and maximise their results, and it has been shown that some of the strategies used are dubious.[33] There are concerns that some academy trusts may be making more use than other schools of strategies such as 'off-rolling' students before their GCSE exams, and entering large numbers of pupils for qualifications which are perceived to be easier.[34] In that the schools in academy trusts serve a disproportionate number of

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[26] DfE, 2018e.
[27] NAO, 2018.
[28] Dickens, 2018a.
[29] Francis 2018.
[30] e.g. Education Select Committee 2015, 2017. Wilshaw 2014, 2016. The Public Accounts committee (2015) and the National Audit Office (2014) have also commented on this issue.
[31] Spielman, 2018a.
[32] Harford, 2018.
[33] Hutchings, 2015.
[34] See e.g. Mansell, 2018, Nye, 2018a, Nye & Thomson, 2018.

disadvantaged pupils, any malpractice by trusts will disproportionately impact on disadvantaged pupils. Such strategies are discussed further in Section 6.

Academy autonomy

Increasing school autonomy was a key part of the original rationale for academisation, in line with the OECD finding that in countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better.[35] The government stresses that academies enjoy greater autonomy than other schools, and thus teachers and headteachers have more control: 'decision-making has truly been localised'.[36] The original intention here was to give academies, generally located in deprived areas, greater freedom to adopt strategies to meet the needs of their pupils.

However, many MATs now require their academies to adopt a prescribed curriculum and practices, and the academies thus have little or no autonomy.[37] Sir David Carter, in an interview with *Schools Week*, acknowledged that this reduces autonomy at school level: 'A lot of CEOs have woken up to the reality that the strongest practice in a trust needs to be trust-wide – by definition, that gets in the way of autonomy. The proof is in outcomes.'[38] Given the OECD conclusion that greater autonomy at school level results in better performance, it is a concern that that so many disadvantaged pupils are in schools with little or no autonomy. This loss of autonomy arises from the legal structure of MATs. Schools in MATs no longer exist as legal entities and cannot decide to leave the MAT.[39] Amanda Spielman, Chief Inspector, has argued that this is not widely understood.[40]

Local democracy

A wider issue is that academisation has involved a vast reduction in local democratic decision-making about education. Academy trusts are appointed rather than elected. Whereas in the past a low-income parent had the opportunity to stand as a school governor, or as a local councillor, they are much less likely to be appointed as trustees of a MAT.[41]

Current policy directions

In terms of present policy, it seems fair to say there is a hiatus. One of the authors of this report, in sketching the 'five phases of the academies programme', has characterised the phase since 2017 as 'an open chapter'.[42] The last policy Green Paper (2017) charted a new focus on grammar schools: thankfully this approach[43] has never come to parliament. But in the meantime, full academisation has diminished as an overt policy aim and agenda – even as the numbers continue to rise. The absence of new regulation or mandate was initially presented as an intentional period of calm and stability. Yet it leaves many issues unresolved – not least the ongoing promulgation of a dual system of responsibility for English state schooling (Local Authorities and Regional Schools Commissioners); and the inter-woven

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[35] e.g. OECD, 2011.
[36] Nick Gibb, School Standards Minister, 2017.
[37] West and Wolfe, 2018.
[38] Dickens, 2018b.
[39] West and Wolfe, 2018.
[40] Spielman 2018b.
[41] A further issue here is the dual system of academies and local authority maintained schools, with different rules governing each sector. One instance where this is problematic is the planning of school places. Local authorities have a legal duty to ensure that sufficient schools are available in the area, but have no legal powers to set up new schools to meet local needs, or control over the admissions process in academies (West and Wolfe, 2018).
[42] Francis 2018
[43] e.g. Macmillan, 2018; Cullinane, 2016.

complexity for academies and MATs of accountability to both RSCs and to Ofsted.[44] And during this period of hiatus, within which a series of Secretaries of State for Education have come and gone, the policy narrative of academies' transformative potential for the educational outcomes of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds appears to have dissipated.[45]

However, academies are prominent in the policies put forward by the Labour opposition. In her speech to the 2018 National conference, Angela Rayner, Shadow Education Secretary, pledged that Labour would end the forced conversion of local schools to academies and scrap the free school programme.[46] Local authorities would be given powers over admissions for all schools in their areas, and would be able to build new schools or force existing academies to expand. They would also be able to take back 'failing' academies. Parents and local communities would have a key role in democratic decision-making about education in their areas. These proposals address the issues of local democracy identified above. However, they do not address the issue that concerns us in this report: the role of sponsored academies in improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged pupils. This does not currently feature strongly in the agenda of either party.

So, when better to take stock of the original intentions of the programme, and assess its impact on pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds? This final report in the Chain Effects series will analyse the most recent data, and also provide an over-arching analysis, drawing conclusions from our five reports.

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[44] See Education Select Committee, 2015.
[45] Indeed, our last Chain Effects report (2017) called for this impetus not to be forgotten.
[46] Rayner, 2018.

3. Research design

The academies included in the analysis

This research is primarily concerned with outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in sponsored academies in academy chains.[47] Our main focus over the five years 2013-17 has been secondary and all-age sponsored academies with Key Stage 4 (KS4) results. In this report we draw together findings from the five years in which we have conducted this analysis.

In our last report we also included an analysis of the 2016 Key Stage 2 (KS2) results in primary and all-age academies, and reviewed outcomes for converter academies in the chains in our analysis groups.[48] These findings are briefly summarised in this report.

Key Stage 4 analysis group

Each year we have included as chains all instances where one sponsor is listed for three or more academies (sponsored or converter). However, we acknowledge that in some cases these are not organised as multi-academy trusts (MATs), and that in practice some schools have multiple sponsors; thus, the organisations we include may not all consider themselves to be chains, and may not have primary responsibility for the schools listed against them.[49]

Our KS4 analysis group includes only chains with at least two secondary or all-age sponsored academies which have consistently been part of the same chain for three academic years, and which had pupils taking GCSE exams in each of those years. While this inevitably limits the number of academies and chains included in the analysis, we have done this because the majority of pupils will have undertaken at least the most recent three years of their education within the chain, and so it seems reasonable to relate their outcomes and progress to the chain.[50]

We have not included free schools in our analyses, because the published data has only recently indicated which free schools are included in MATs, and because even in 2017, only three free schools met our criterion of having GCSE results in three successive years.

The number and size of the chains we have been able to include in the report has increased over the years in line with the increased number of sponsored academies.

	Year GCSE exams taken				
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Number of chains	31	34	39	48	58
Number of academies	125	156	187	244	288

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[47] All academies opened prior to September 2010 are classified as sponsored by the DfE; the majority of these were underperforming schools but a small number were City Technology Colleges, or were newly opened schools. Since September 2010, all the school that have become sponsored academies were identified as under-performing.

[48] We considered including the free schools in academy chains, but the majority are too new to have attainment data for the relevant years.

[49] For further discussion, see Hutchings, Francis & De Vries, 2014.

[50] The DfE now use this approach in their annual statistical release analysing the performance of MATs.

Just 26 chains have been included in all five reports. Five of the original chains no longer exist (some as a result of diocesan reorganisation, other have closed).

The 58 chains included in the analysis of 2017 data are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Chains and number of academies included in the analysis of 2017 performance

Chain	No. of schools in the analysis	Total academies in the chain June 2017	Chain	No. of schools in the analysis	Total academies in the chain June 2017
Academies Enterprise Trust (AET)	27	66	Inspiration Trust	2	9
Academy Transformation Trust (ATT)	6	24	Kemnal Academy Trust, The (TKAT)	3	40
Aldridge Education	4	7	Landau Forte Charitable Trust	3	6
ARK Schools	11	30	Leigh Academies Trust	3	14
Aspirations Academies Trust (AAT)	2	9	Mercers Company, The	2	3
Bridgwater College Trust	2	4	Merchant Venturers, The Society of	2	7
Bright Futures Educational Trust	2	7	Northern Education Trust	7	20
Brook Learning Trust	2	3	Oasis Community Learning	14	45
Brooke Weston Trust	4	9	Ormiston Academies Trust	24	31
Cabot Learning Federation	7	14	Outwood Grange Academies Trust	7	21
Cambridge Meridian Academies Trust (CMAT)	2	8	RSA Academies	2	5
CfBT Education Trust	3	12	Sidney Stringer Academy Trust	2	4
City of London Academies Trust	3	4	Swale Academies Trust	2	9
Creative Education Trust	4	13	Tapton School Academy trust	2	8
David Meller	2	4	The Co-operative Group	3	8
David Ross Education Trust (DRET)	5	32	The Education Fellowship Trust	4	12
Delta Academies Trust	7	40	The Haberdashers' Livery Company	4	5
Diocese of Exeter	2	17	The Midland Academies Trust	2	4
Diocese of London	2	12	The Priory Federation of Academies Trust	4	4
Diocese of Oxford	3	28	The Redhill Academy Trust	2	7
Diverse Academies Trust	2	9	The Skinners' Company	3	5
Dixons Academy Trust	2	4	Transforming Education in Norfolk (TEN Group)	2	5
E-ACT	11	24	Trust in Learning (Academies)	2	4
Eastern Multi-Academy Trust	3	9	UCAT	3	6

Emmanuel Schools Foundation	3	3	United Learning	25	44
Fylde Coast Teaching School Ltd	2	7	University of Brighton (Hastings Academies Trust)	2	15
Grace Foundation	3	3	Wakefield City Academies Trust	2	21
Greenwood Academies Trust	7	30	White Rose Trust	3	3
Harris Federation	14	32	Woodard Academies Trust	5	5

Notes: This list uses sponsors as recorded on the DfE list published in June 2017.[51] Some academies have since changed sponsor. One sponsor (Wakefield City Academies Trust) ceased to sponsor academies in autumn 2017.

Table 2 lists sponsors in the form given on the DfE list of academies. But in the remainder of this report we have shortened these by removing words such as 'Trust', 'Federation', 'Foundation', 'Group' etc. Names of chains in which only two academies are included are italicised in the text of the report and on tables. On graphs, their names are in lower case.

The data

The 2017 data used in this report are derived from the School Performance Tables,[52] produced by NFER for the Sutton Trust.[53] Figures have been calculated for each chain in the analysis group. Where data for an academy has been suppressed because there are fewer than six pupils in a particular group, or because of low coverage, that academy has been omitted from the chain results.

National changes to attainment data

Over the five years in which we have produced Chain Effects reports, there have been major changes in the ways in which secondary school performance is measured. Whereas in 2013, the main accountability measure was the percentage of pupils achieving five A*-C grades including English and mathematics at GCSE, from 2016 the headline accountability measures became Attainment 8 and Progress 8, together with attainment in English and maths, and English Baccalaureate (EBacc) entry and achievement. Details of these measures are in Appendix A.[54]

These new measures involve a greater focus on pupil progress, and an emphasis on a more academic curriculum. They also ensure that the achievements of all pupils are included in the measures by which a school is judged (both Attainment 8 and Progress 8 are based on averages), and thus reduce the incentive to focus on borderline pupils, which was a feature of previous measures.[55]

As well as introducing new performance measures, GCSE exams in English and mathematics have been made more challenging, and in 2017 the system for grading these subjects at GCSE changed from A*-G grades to 1-9, with 9 being the highest. Published figures show both 'standard passes' (at Grade 4 and above, equivalent to passes at Grade C and above in the old system) and 'strong passes' (Grade 5

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[51] DfE, 2017.
[52] DfE, 2018a.
[53] Attainment data from 2013, 2014 and 2015 was also derived from the School Performance Tables. The 2016 data was derived from the National Pupil Database by Education Datalab.
[54] A further accountability measure is destinations after Key Stage 4.
[55] Ball et al., 2012.

and above).[56] Other subjects will be reformed to increase the level of challenge and will move to the new grading system by 2020.

These changes mean that it is impossible to say how much a school (or academy chain) has improved its performance over the years.

Limitations

The main limitation of the Chain Effects reports is that only 46% of the sponsored academies that existed in June 2017 are included; the remainder had either not been academies for three years (22%), or were in MATs which did not meet the criteria set out Section 3.2 above (37%). Section 3 explained our rationale for including only those schools that have been in the same chain for three years. However, in most chains listed at KS4, all or a substantial majority of the secondary sponsored academies met our criteria for inclusion. Thus, our findings give a good picture of the performance of those chains. It is only in two rapidly growing chains that our findings give a partial picture of their success with disadvantaged pupils: *Redhill* (two out of six) and Outwood Grange (seven out of 13).

Another limitation is that in this report, the unit of analysis is the academy chain. However, it should not be assumed that schools within each chain are similar to each other. There is considerable variability within chains in terms of their Ofsted outcomes and attainment.[57] There is also wide variation in the characteristics of the intake of each academy and the attainment figures. These differences tend to reflect the different routes through which schools became sponsored academies; some of the original sponsored academies were private schools or former City Technology Colleges and some had been high-attaining state schools but had chosen to become academies before conversion was possible. In some, but not all cases, these schools still have much higher attainment than the former 'failing' schools. Another historical difference is between academies that were former failing schools and academies that were created as new schools: for example, ARK has created a number of new sponsored academies (similar schools created now would be termed Free Schools). Where chains are relatively small, this can skew the overall attainment figures we are using.

Structure of the report

The next section reviews chain characteristics that may impact on attainment outcomes. Section 5 then focuses on pupil performance in 2017, and Section 6 considers how chains have performed over the five years of this analysis.

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[56] Although the exam content has become more challenging, in 2017 the 'standard' pass (Grade 4 and above) was awarded to the same proportion of pupils achieved Grade C and above in the previous grading system. The 'strong' pass (Grade 5 and above) is designed to be a benchmark comparable with high performing education systems.
[57] See Nye, 2018b.

4. Chain characteristics that may impact on attainment

A wide range of pupil characteristics impact on attainment. These include gender and ethnicity, socio-economic and social class background (as indicated by wealth, level of parental education, and so on), and birth date within the school year.[58] When comparing the attainment of pupils in different schools, pupil characteristics have been identified as having a key impact on attainment. It is important to note, however, that while pupils with certain characteristics tend to attain less well, this is not inevitable. Some schools 'buck the trend'.

The Chain Effects reports focus on disadvantage, because a key aspect of the creation of sponsored academies was the assumption that they would 'break the cycle of disadvantage'.[59] The attainment of disadvantaged pupils has been consistently lower than that of their peers, and their progress less rapid (Table 3).

Table 3: Performance of disadvantaged and other pupils at KS4 in state-funded mainstream schools, 2017

	Attainment 8 score	Standard pass in both GCSE English and mathematics	Progress 8
Disadvantaged	38.6	46.4%	-0.34
Not disadvantaged	50.2	72.0%	0.12

The proportion of disadvantaged pupils within the analysis group of chains varies considerably. Nationally, 27% of all KS4 pupils in state-funded mainstream schools were defined as 'disadvantaged' in 2017; the figures for the analysis group of chains varied from 18% to over 70%. This shows that, by and large, the sponsored academies within these chains were retaining their intended purpose of serving disproportionately disadvantaged demographics (including a few with more than double the national percentage of disadvantaged students).

While disadvantage has a substantial effect on attainment figures, the strongest predictor of KS4 pupils' attainment is their prior attainment, measured by their performance in the Key Stage 2 (KS2) national tests. The DfE statistics distinguish three groups of pupils; those whose attainment was average (that is, they achieved Level 4 in National Curriculum tests); below average, or low (achieved below Level 4) and above average, or high (achieved Level 5 or above). In 2017, 12% of pupils taking GCSE had low prior attainment and 40% had high prior attainment. These three groups performed very differently at KS4 (Table 4).

Table 4: Performance of pupils at KS4 by prior attainment in state-funded mainstream schools, 2017

KS2 attainment	Attainment 8 score	Standard pass in both GCSE English and mathematics
Low	25.2	10.8%
Average	41.1	55.5%
High	60.5	92.8%

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[58] For commentary on the impact of some of these factors on pupil attainment, see Lupton et al., 2009; Strand, 2014; Education Select Committee, 2014.
[59] See Blunkett, 2000.

Cleary there is some overlap between disadvantaged pupils and those with low prior attainment. Nationally, the disadvantaged group includes a disproportionate number of pupils with low prior attainment (though this is still only a quarter of all disadvantaged pupils).

Figure 2 shows both the percentage of disadvantaged pupils and the percentage with low prior attainment in each chain in the analysis group. It shows that the chains face very different levels of challenge. Most have more than the national average both of disadvantaged pupils, and of those with low prior attainment. *Mercers* is the only one that has less than the national average of pupils in both categories.

Among the chains with the greatest levels of challenge, *TEN* has the highest percentage of pupils with low prior attainment, *Fylde Coast* the highest percentage of disadvantaged pupils, and Cooperative, White Rose and University of Brighton have high percentages in both groups. Among the larger chains, Oasis, E-ACT and ARK have the highest levels of challenge using these measures.[60]

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[60] We recognise that pupil characteristics are not easily summed up in metrics; there is undoubtedly a difference in outlook and prospects between disadvantaged pupils living in a depressed area where long-term unemployment is endemic, and those living in a more affluent area where it is possible to get jobs. The challenges facing schools will differ in each case. We are not suggesting that all disadvantaged pupils, or all those with low prior attainment are the same. But we need to use definitions that enable us to distinguish between groups of pupils; recognising that this may over-simplify reality.

Figure 2: Percentage of pupils in analysis group academies in each chain who are disadvantaged, and percentage with low prior attainment, compared with the percentages in all mainstream state-funded schools

Note that prior attainment figures are not available for all pupils. Nationally, almost 5% of KS4 pupils in mainstream secondary schools do not have prior attainment data.

Figure 2 shows that the pupil intake varies widely across the chains. But the pupil demographic of the large majority – with higher than average numbers of disadvantaged pupils and, especially, low prior attaining pupils, suggests that academy chains have largely retained their original focus on pupils needing additional help and resource, reflecting the original mission of the academies programme. In this sense, it is important to note that most chains face a greater level of challenge in terms of their intake than the mainstream state school average, and some a very much greater level.

In our first report, we also reviewed characteristics of the chains that might potentially impact on their success. We found that chains that had grown very rapidly were less likely to do well, while those in London were more likely to have high attainment. Other research has suggested that chains focused in a limited geographical area are more successful.[61] The chain characteristic that is perhaps the most important in relation to performance is their strategy for supporting school improvement. Our reports have emphasised the importance of sharing successful strategies rather than competing.

[61] DfE, 2014a; Hill et al., 2012.

5. The performance of disadvantaged pupils in 2017

This section below reviews the 2017 performance of disadvantaged pupils in the analysis group chains.

Attainment 8 and Progress 8

Figure 3 provides an overview of the performance of disadvantaged pupils in the analysis group chains in 2017, using Attainment 8 and Progress 8 figures It is important to note that the comparison is with the national figures for *disadvantaged* pupils in mainstream schools (represented by the axes on Figure 3). But of course, the target should be to eliminate the gap between disadvantaged and other pupils. The national figures for all pupils in mainstream schools are 0.0 for Progress 8 and 47.4 for Attainment 8. Only City of London and *Diocese of London* exceed these levels (and Harris almost does so).
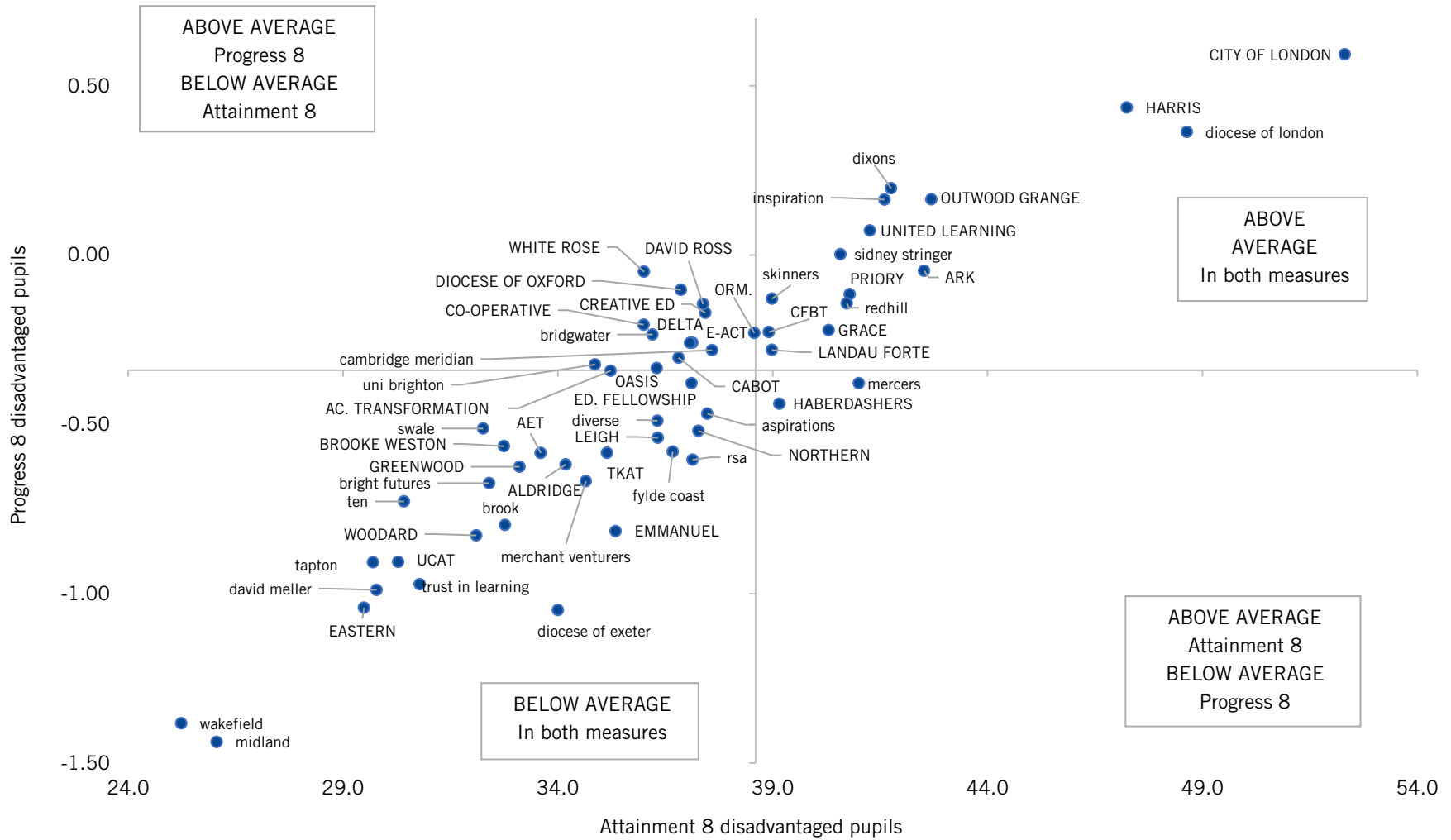
However, our main comparison is with national scores achieved by disadvantaged pupils. Half of the analysis group chains had above average Progress 8 scores, whereas less than a third have above average Attainment 8. This is a pattern we have found in each of our reports: pupil progress in sponsored academies is generally better in comparison to national figures than their level of attainment; this results from the larger numbers of pupils who did not achieve well at primary school.

In comparison to last year, both the national and the chains' Attainment 8 figures are about three percentage points lower as a result of the change to GCSE grades. Overall Figure 3 presents a very similar picture to the equivalent findings in our last report, and to graphs in previous reports where we have compared attainment and progress.

Chains that do well on one measure tend to also do well on the other. But it is worth noting the cluster of chains where progress is above average but attainment has not yet reached that level. Also noteworthy are the two chains where attainment is above average but progress below average (Haberdashers and *Mercers*). It is worrying that in almost half the chains, both measures are below the national average. Most concerning is the very poor performance of *Wakefield* and *Midland. Wakefield* schools were transferred to other sponsors during autumn 2017.

Figure 3: Disadvantaged pupils: Attainment 8 and Progress 8, 2017, compared with national figures for disadvantaged pupils

Percentage achieving passes in English and maths

Attainment 8 is of interest because it represents the achievements of all pupils in a school, even when these are below 'pass' level. But what is more important to the individual pupil is whether they achieve at least Grade 4 in GCSE English and maths, as these are now required for entry to many courses, and often by employers; however, some require standard passes (Grades 9-4), while others have adopted the new benchmark, strong passes.

The percentage of students achieving standard passes in both English and maths is also of interest because, unlike Progress 8 and Attainment 8, the same measure has been used over a number of years with only limited changes, and so we can review whether chains have succeeded in improving the performance of their disadvantaged pupils.[62] Figure 4 compares the percentage of pupils achieving Grade C or above in 2015 with those achieving Grade 4 or above in 2017. We have used the same schools in each chain in each of these years.
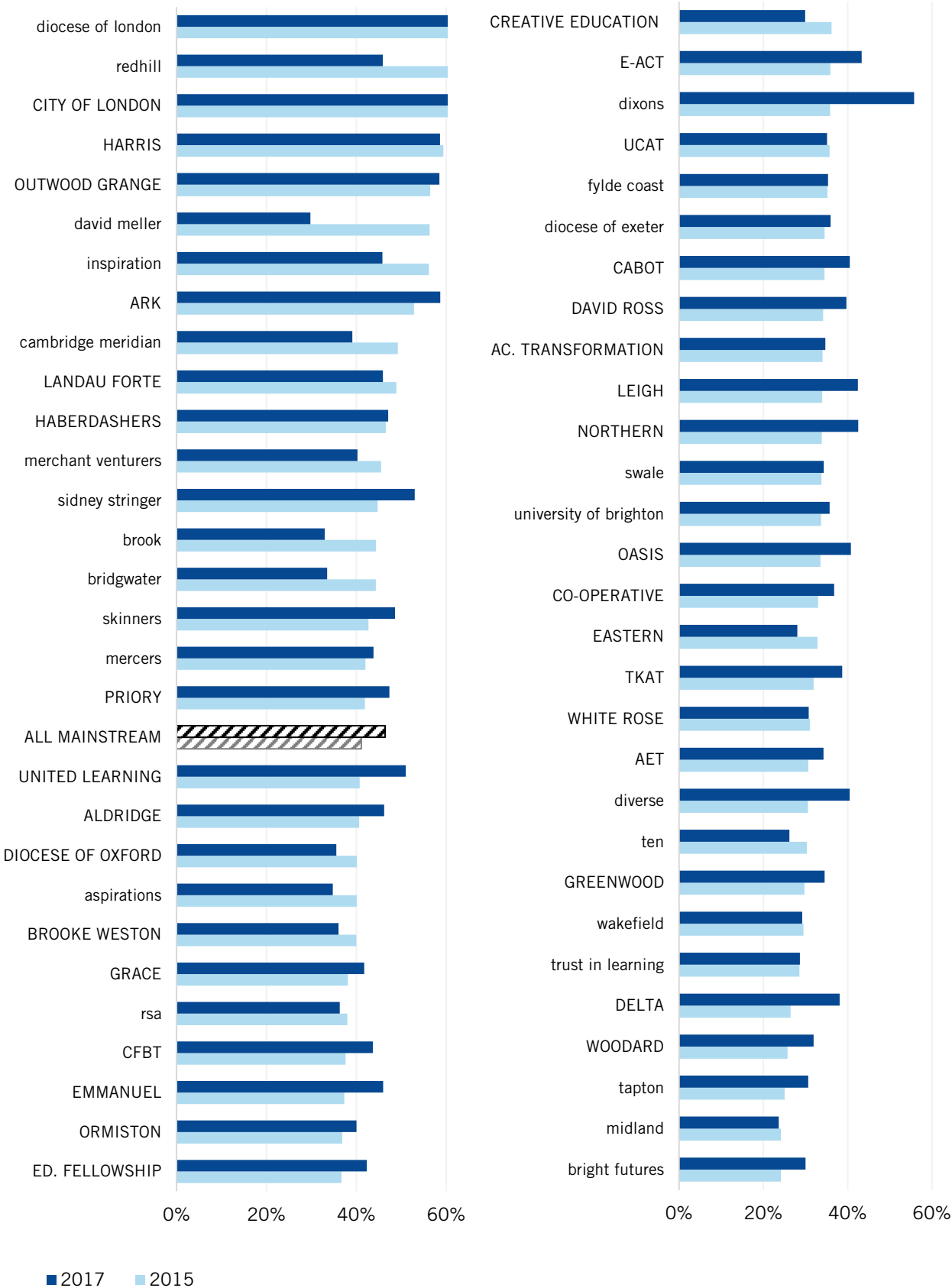
Figure 4 is arranged by the 2015 performance, and shows that more than half the chains had a higher percentage of pupils achieving this measure in 2017 than 2015, though in some cases the improvement was very small. The most notable improvement was made by *Dixons*. However, over a third of chains, including some which did well in 2015, had a lower percentage of pupils passing both English and maths in 2017. Possibly they had adapted less well to the demands of the reformed 2017 English and maths GCSEs. In 2015 18 of the chains exceeded the national percentage, but in 2017 only 11 did so. In 2017, in the vast majority of chains, less than half of disadvantaged pupils achieved this measure, which is of such importance for their future prospects.

While Grade 4 and above is a standard pass equivalent to the old Grade C and above, the new government benchmark is much more challenging: the 'strong' pass at Grade 5 and above. In most chains, about 20% fewer pupils achieved strong then standard passes, indicating how very much more challenging the new benchmark is. While raising standards is a laudable aim, it is debatable whether the best way to do this is to make a higher percentage of pupils come away with what they perceive to be a fail.

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[62] English and maths GCSEs in 2017 were very much more challenging, 9-1 grades are used, but as the bottom of Grade C and of Grade 4 are equivalent, comparisons can be made with previous years. There were also changes between 2015 and 2016. In 2016, pupils could achieve the English component with A* to C in English language or literature. In 2015 pupils had to achieve an A* to C in English language, and have sat an English literature exam. The change means a higher proportion of pupils achieve the measure in 2016. Thus the improvement shown between 2015 and 2017 is not precise, but as the changes have been for all schools, it is possible to compare across chains.

Figure 4: Percentage of disadvantaged pupils in each chain achieving Grade C /4 or above in both English and maths, 2015 and 2017

English Baccalaureate

The EBacc continues to be achieved by only a small minority of disadvantaged pupils nationally and in our analysis group. There is considerable variation across chains in the percentage of pupils entered for all EBacc subjects (Figure 5), which suggests that chains have different strategies in relation to this. The proportion of pupils entered for all EBacc subjects is a government accountability measure, and can clearly boost Attainment 8 scores, even if a standard or strong pass is not achieved. However, some chains appear to focus more on non-EBacc Attainment 8 slots. For example, Outwood Grange and Grace, both of had more than the national average scores for disadvantaged pupils for both Progress 8 and Attainment 8, entered only 19% and 10% respectively of disadvantaged pupils for all EBacc subjects – well below the national figure of 27% of disadvantaged pupils. The EBacc subject that attracts the fewest entries is languages, and this may relate in part to teacher shortages in languages.

The proportion of those entered for all EBacc subjects who the achieved EBacc (with either strong or standard passes) varies hugely. As we said above, Outwood Grange entered only 19% of disadvantaged pupils, but 13% achieved standard passes (well above the average across the chains). In contrast, *David Meller* entered 36% in all EBacc subjects, with only 1.4% achieving a standard pass in all of them, and Greenwood entered almost half its disadvantaged pupils, with 8.5% achieving standard passes.

Those entering larger numbers are responding to the government drive to raise EBacc entry rates. Their targets are that 75% of pupils should study and enter all EBacc subjects by 2022 and 90% by 2025.[63] To incentivise schools to provide a rigorous academic curriculum for *all* pupils, EBacc entry and EBacc average point score have joined the headline accountability measures. Many concerns have been voiced about this policy, with some arguing that the EBacc is not suitable for all pupils (particularly for some of those who are disadvantaged or have low prior attainment) both because they may lack aptitude for, or interest in, these subjects, and others concerned that the number of academic subjects in EBacc may stretch some pupils' efforts too widely, and result in very low grades. It has been argued that it is inappropriate to enter pupils into exams which they are likely to fail to achieve grades that are of any value for their future education or employment.

Some light is shed on this debate by a Sutton Trust investigation of a group of schools that responded very quickly to the introduction of EBacc, transforming their curriculum between 2012 and 2013, and dramatically increasing the numbers entering all EBacc subjects.[64] This study showed that disadvantaged pupils benefited the most from these changes, with more of them achieving GCSEs at Grade C or above English and maths, more taking A levels and fewer dropping out of education. It would be of interest to repeat this analysis with schools that have increased EBacc entries more recently.

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[63] DfE, 2018f.
[64] Allen & Thomson, 2016.

Figure 5: EBacc entries and achievement, disadvantaged pupils 2017

strong pass ■ standard pass ■ Ebacc entry

Reviewing the GSCE outcomes for Outwood Grange (entering only 28% of all pupils for EBacc) and *David Meller* and Greenwood (entering more than half their pupils for EBacc), around a quarter of the entries to EBacc subjects by all pupils resulted in a grade below C/4, whereas more than half the entries in the other two chains did so. This raises questions about the value of entering pupils into subjects in which they are unlikely to achieve the grades required for further study or for employment (we explore this point in the Discussion section). However, research using the National Pupil Database would shed more light on the outcomes for individual pupils, and for those who are disadvantaged. Similarly, there seems little to support the idea that those chains with high EBacc entry rates are *necessarily* improving disadvantaged pupils' performance in English and maths. Comparing Figure 5 with Figure 4 shows that most of those chains with a high level of EBacc entry among their disadvantaged pupils showed little or no increase in the percentage achieving both English and maths.

While demonstrating the benefits of moving to a curriculum based on EBacc subjects, the Sutton Trust research also concluded that the EBacc is inappropriate for up to 30% of pupils.[65] This brings into question the wisdom of the 90% target for entry, and also raises issues about the provision of suitable routes for such pupils.

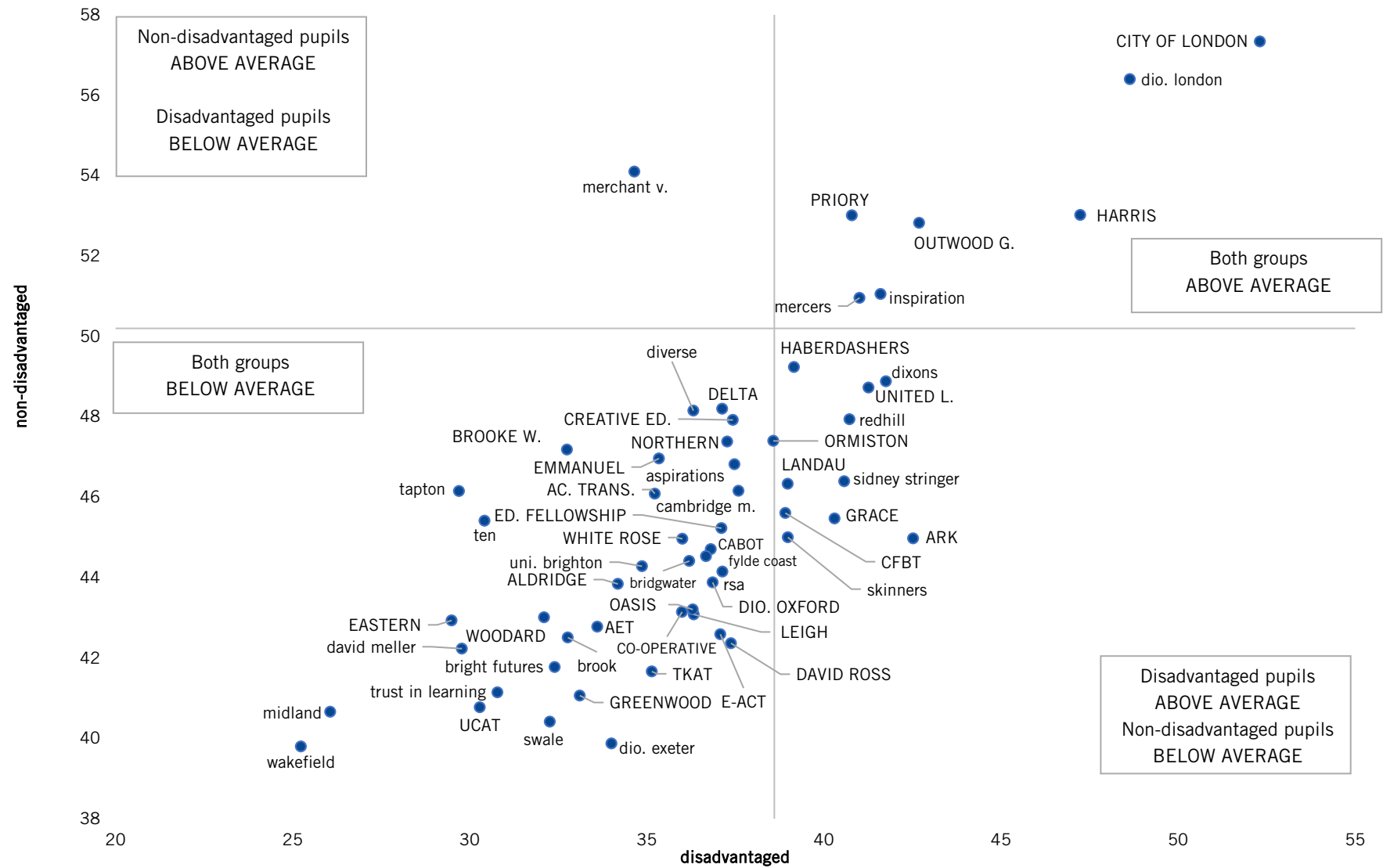### *Comparing outcomes for disadvantaged pupils with those who are not disadvantaged*

There is a strong correlation between the outcomes for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils. In most chains the attainment gap between these two groups is smaller than the national average. This pattern has been consistent over the five years of this analysis. Of course, as we have shown, this may be explained by the large numbers and relatively low performance of those pupils *not* classified as disadvantaged within these chains, but who would be broadly considered working class. It is important to bear in mind that the socio-economic status of the 'non-disadvantaged' group varies significantly between localities and schools, and in the more deprived areas where sponsored academies tend to be located, they are often only a little better off than those classed as 'disadvantaged'.

Figure 6 shows that two-thirds of the analysis group chains are below the national figures for Attainment 8 for both groups, and a further fifth are above for disadvantaged pupils but not for the other pupils. Only eight chains achieved Attainment 8 scores above the national average for their pupils who are not disadvantaged.

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[65] Allen & Thomson, 2016.

Figure 6: Attainment 8 score for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils, 2017

Non-disadvantaged pupils
ABOVE AVERAGE

Disadvantaged pupils
BELOW AVERAGE

Both groups
ABOVE AVERAGE

Both groups
BELOW AVERAGE

Disadvantaged pupils
ABOVE AVERAGE
Non-disadvantaged pupils
BELOW AVERAGE

CITY OF LONDON
dio. london
merchant v.
PRIORY
HARRIS
OUTWOOD G.
mercers   inspiration
HABERDASHERS
diverse
dixons
DELTA   UNITED L.
CREATIVE ED.   redhill
BROOKE W.   NORTHERN   ORMISTON
EMMANUEL   LANDAU
aspirations   sidney stringer
AC. TRANS.
tapton   cambridge m.
ED. FELLOWSHIP   GRACE
ten   WHITE ROSE   ARK
CABOT
uni. brighton   fylde coast   CFBT
ALDRIDGE   bridgwater   rsa   skinners
OASIS   DIO. OXFORD
EASTERN   AET   LEIGH
david meller   WOODARD
bright futures   brook   CO-OPERATIVE
trust in learning   TKAT   DAVID ROSS
midland   GREENWOOD   E-ACT
UCAT
wakefield   swale   dio. exeter

non-disadvantaged

disadvantaged

The equivalent figures for progress are more encouraging; in half the chains, disadvantaged pupils have made better progress than the national average, and in 43% this is the case for non-disadvantaged pupils.

Which chains were most effective for disadvantaged pupils in 2017?

As in our previous reports, we have created a single overall measure of the attainment of disadvantaged pupils, which combines measures of both attainment and progress. This year the components of our summary measure are the same as last year:

- average Attainment 8 score;
- Progress 8 score;
- percentage achieving a standard pass or above in both English and mathematics.

These are all headline accountability measures in the system implemented for the first time in 2016. We have not included the other headline measures: EBacc entry and achievement. Our concern is with attainment rather than exam entries, and for a pupil, we believe that achieving Grade C or above in mathematics and English is more important for future education and employment than achieving EBacc (which in any case includes these subjects).

Each chain's summary score has then been calculated using the difference between the chain and all mainstream schools for each of the above measures, with each of these measures given equal weight. Table 5 shows the chains performing above and below the average for mainstream schools in this weighted attainment measure. Within each band chains are listed in alphabetical order.

Table 5: Chains performing above and below the mainstream average on key measures of attainment for disadvantaged pupils in 2017

	Progress 8	Attainment 8	Standard pass (grades 9-4) in both English and maths %	Overall rank
Well above average	City of London Diocese of London Dixons Harris Inspiration Outwood Grange	City of London Diocese of London Harris	City of London Diocese of London	City of London Diocese of London Harris
Above average	ARK Bridgwater Cambridge Meridian CfBT Co-operative Creative Education David Ross Delta Diocese of Oxford E-ACT Grace Landau Forte Ormiston Priory Redhill Sidney Stringer Skinners' United Learning White Rose	ARK Dixons Grace Inspiration Mercers Outwood Grange Priory Redhill Sidney Stringer United Learning CfBT Haberdashers Landau Forte Ormiston Skinners'	ARK Dixons Harris Outwood Grange Sidney Stringer Skinners' United Learning Aldridge Education Emmanuel Haberdashers Inspiration Landau Forte Priory Redhill	ARK Dixons Inspiration Outwood Grange Priory Redhill Sidney Stringer Skinners' United Learning CfBT David Ross E-ACT Grace Haberdashers Landau Forte Mercers Ormiston
Average	Ac. Transformation Cabot Education Fellowship Mercers Oasis University of Brighton	Ac. Transformation AET Aldridge Education Aspirations Bridgwater Bright Futures Brook Brooke Weston Cabot Cambridge Meridian Co-operative Creative Education David Ross	Ac. Transformation AET Aspirations Bridgwater Brook Brooke Weston Cabot Cambridge Meridian CfBT Co-operative David Ross Delta Diocese of Exeter Diocese of Oxford Diverse E-ACT Education Fellowship Fylde Coast Grace Greenwood Leigh	Ac. Transformation AET Aldridge Education Aspirations Bridgwater Bright Futures Brook Brooke Weston Cabot Cambridge Meridian Co-operative Creative Education Delta Diocese of Exeter Diocese of Oxford Diverse Education Fellowship Emmanuel Fylde Coast Greenwood Leigh
Below average	AET Aldridge Education Aspirations Bright Futures Brooke Weston Diverse Fylde Coast Greenwood TKAT Leigh	Delta Diocese of Exeter Diocese of Oxford Diverse E-ACT Education Fellowship Emmanuel Fylde Coast Greenwood Leigh	E-ACT Education Fellowship Fylde Coast Grace Greenwood Leigh Mercers Merchant Venturers Northern Oasis	

Merchant Venturers	Merchant Venturers	Ormiston	Merchant Venturers
Northern	Northern	RSA	Northern
RSA	Oasis	Swale	Oasis
Swale	RSA	TKAT	RSA
Haberdashers	Swale	UCAT	Swale
TEN	TKAT	University of Brighton	TKAT
Brook	Trust in Learning	Woodard	University of Brighton
David Meller	University of Brighton	Bright Futures	White Rose
Diocese of Exeter	White Rose	Creative Education	Woodard
Eastern	Woodard	David Meller	David Meller
Emmanuel	David Meller	Eastern	Eastern
Midland	Eastern	Midland	Midland
Tapton	Midland	Tapton	Tapton
Trust in Learning	Tapton	TEN	TEN
UCAT	TEN	Trust in Learning	Trust in Learning
Wakefield	UCAT	Wakefield	UCAT
Woodard	Wakefield	White Rose	Wakefield

Row label (left): **Well below average**

Note: Top tier: Well above average (greater than 1.0 Standard Deviations better attainment than mainstream), second tier: above average (0.1 to 1.0 SDs better); third tier: average (within 0.10 SDs of mainstream); fourth tier: below average (-0.10 & -1.0 SDs worse); bottom tier: well below average (less than -1.0 SDs worse improvement than mainstream). Within categories chains are in alphabetical order.

Table 5 shows that in comparison to the mainstream school average, the analysis group academies are more successful on the Progress 8 measure than on Attainment 8 or achieving standard passes in English and maths GCSE. This reflects the fact that the vast majority have above average percentages of pupils with low prior attainment.

The table also demonstrates, as in previous years, the sharply differentiated quality of outcomes achieved by chains for their disadvantaged pupils, indicating strongly differentiated provision at either end of the scale. In 2017 just two chains (both in London: City of London *and Diocese of London*) were 'well above average' in all four measures. A further six were 'above average' or 'well above' for all measures: Harris, *Dixons*, Outward Grange, ARK, *Sidney Stringer*, and United Learning. At the other end of the scale, the 'below average' group is much larger, and five chains are 'well below average' on each measure (*David Meller*, Eastern, *Midland, Tapton*, and *Wakefield*).

This overall measure of attainment also enables us to review changes in ranking over the five years; we do this in Section 6 of this report.

6. Changes in performance 2013-2017

In this section, we review how the analysis group academies have performed over the five years in which we have been conducting this analysis, considering first overall performance – Ofsted grades and performance against the floor standard – and then the attainment of disadvantaged pupils using the overall measure as on Table 5. We then draw together other key findings from our previous reports.

Ofsted and the floor standard

In our reports, we have reviewed how the analysis group of sponsored academies performed in their most recent Ofsted inspections (though we are aware that in some cases these took place some years earlier). The latest results available in August 2017 showed that a third of the analysis group chains had one or more schools that were judged to be Inadequate, and therefore vulnerable to re-brokering.

Figure 7 shows outcomes for the analysis group in comparison to the national pattern over the years 2014-17.

Figure 7: Percentage of secondary schools judged Inadequate or Requires Improvement in the analysis group and nationally, 2014 -17

a)   Includes all chains in the analysis group

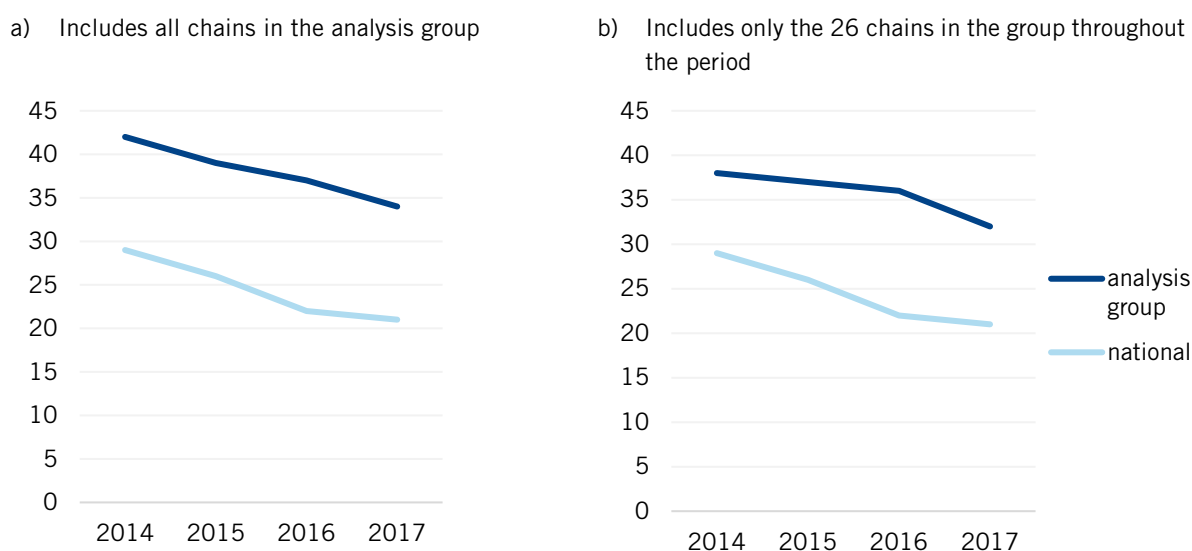b)   Includes only the 26 chains in the group throughout the period

Figure 7a shows that in comparison with all secondary schools, a higher proportion of analysis group academies were judged as Requires Improvement or Inadequate (using the most recent inspection grades). While the proportion in these categories decreased between 2014 and 2017, the gap between the analysis group and the national figures remains very much the same. However, these figures include chains are no longer part of the group, and new entrants. Figure 7b uses only the 26 chains that were in the analysis group throughout the period (though the number of sponsored secondary academies in these chains that were included in the group increased from 135 to 196). This group shows a widening of the gap between 2014 and 2016 and a narrowing in the final year.

We have also reviewed the percentage of schools below the government's floor standards. Here it is important to note that the floor standard, originally based on percentage of 5 A*-C GCSEs including

English and maths, changed in 2016, and is now based on pupil progress as shown by Progress 8. We would expect this to favour sponsored academies which as we have shown, tend to show good pupil progress, but low attainment (reflecting the proportion of pupils with low primary school attainment).

Figure 8: Percentage of secondary schools below the floor standard in the analysis group and nationally, 2014 -17
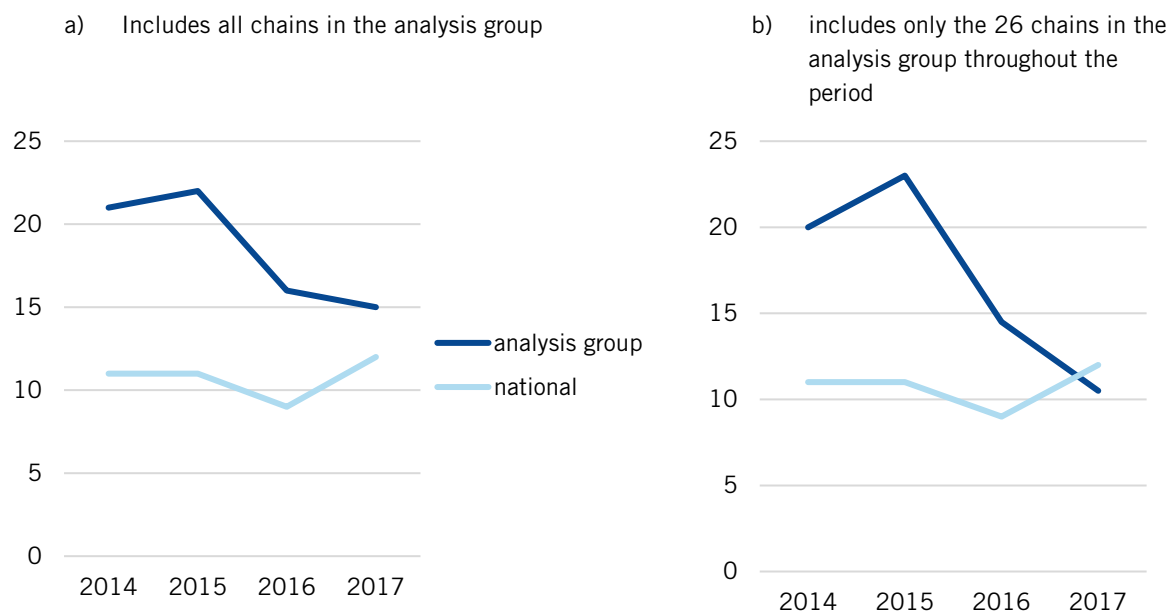
a)   Includes all chains in the analysis group

b)   includes only the 26 chains in the analysis group throughout the period

Figure 8a, using all the chains in the group each year, shows that the proportion of academies below the floor standard in the analysis group was higher than the national figure each year, but that the gap between the two groups has narrowed, which is encouraging. Nevertheless, in 2017, 25 out of 58 analysis group chains had at least one school below floor.
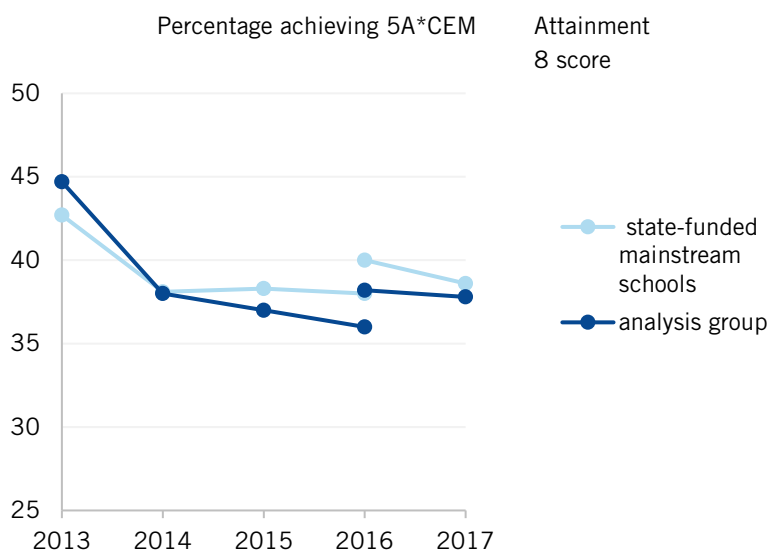
Figure 8b, based on only the 26 chains that were in the analysis group throughout the period, is even more encouraging, since in 2017 the percentage of schools below floor was less than the national figure. Possible reasons for this will be discussed in the section that follows.

Both Figure 8a and 8b show that the analysis group academies benefited substantially from the new floor standard methodology introduced in 2016, based on pupil progress. As Figure 3 showed, more chains have above average pupil progress than have above average attainment.

Changes in the performance of the analysis group academy chains 2013-17

The changes to the exams taken, the way they are graded, and the key performance indicators make it impossible to compare standards over time. However, we can review how results for one group compare with another and how this has changed. Figure 9 below shows the performance of disadvantaged pupils in our analysis group of academies in comparison with pupils in all mainstream schools. From 2013-2016, it uses the percentage of pupils achieving 5 A*-C GCSEs at Grade C or above including English and maths (5A*CEM). For 2016 and 2017, Attainment 8 scores are shown. Note that for 2016 we show both measures.

Figure 9: Performance of disadvantaged pupils in analysis group academies compared with those in all mainstream schools

In 2013 the analysis group academies had a higher percentage of disadvantaged pupils achieving 5A*CEM than the national figure for all mainstream schools. In 2014 there was little difference between these groups. From 2015 onwards, the analysis group performed less well than mainstream schools, though in 2017 the difference was less than it had been. The decrease in national Attainment 8 scores between 2016 and 2017 is explained by methodological changes in the way it is calculated, rather than poorer attainment;[66] this suggests a relative improvement in Attainment 8 scores in the analysis group. A similar pattern emerges when we review the number of chains in our analysis performing above or below the mainstream average, using the overall attainment measure we developed. Figure 10a shows the percentage of chains that were above and below the mainstream average on that measure. It shows that in comparison with the national pattern, overall performance of disadvantaged pupils in analysis group chains declined between 2013 and 2016 but has improved in 2017.
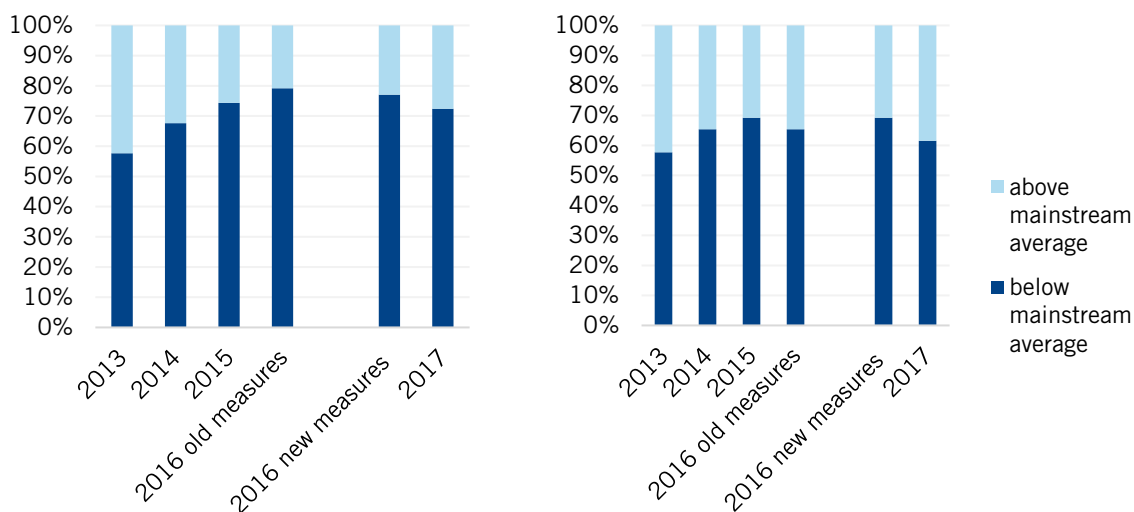
One possible reason for this pattern is that the number of chains in the analysis group has increased during this period (from 31 in 2013 to 58 in 2017) and the new entrants had lower performance. Therefore we have also reviewed the same figures using only the 26 chains which have consistently been in the analysis group. This is shown in Figure 10b. The pattern is similar but less marked. Further review shows that 78% of new chains entering the analysis group were below average in their first year, making the performance of the whole analysis group worse. This suggests that new academy trusts take time to establish themselves and find the most effective ways of improving performance.

The pattern shown above (a relative decline in performance among analysis group academies between 2013 and 2016) may also reflect the time it took for academy chains (and the schools in them) to adapt to changes in performance measures. The adjustment needed has been the least for schools which in the past have taught a strongly academic curriculum, and greatest for those which taught more vocational subjects. In our first report, we noted that in comparison to other types of school, sponsored academies entered far more of their pupils for vocational qualifications. The extent to which this happened varied across chains. When the list of qualifications that were considered 'equivalent' to GCSE was pruned following the Wolf Report, sponsored academies had to make larger changes to their curriculum and staffing than other types of school, and this affected some chains more than others.

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[66] DfE, 2018b.

Figure 10: Percentage of chains above and below the average figure on the overall attainment measure for all disadvantaged pupils 2013-17

a) Percentage of all chains in the analysis group

b) Percentage of 26 chains that were in the analysis group in all five years

Similarly, the change in key performance measures from 5 A*-C grade GCSEs or equivalent including English and maths to Attainment 8 and Progress 8 meant that a considerable adjustment had to take place. Attainment 8 measures the achievement of a pupil across eight, mainly academic, qualifications (regardless of whether a GCSE pass is achieved or not). Progress 8 uses the same subjects. It thus becomes particularly important to enter pupils for exams in eight subjects that count towards this, even if their grades are low. This again required a substantial change in many sponsored academies which had not previously entered pupils for so many academic subjects. The position in high-performing schools with fewer disadvantaged pupils was rather different. They had always focused on academic subjects and so had to make few changes.

Change over time in the relative ranking of academy chain performance

Each year we have ranked all the chains in the analysis group in terms of their overall performance. Considering first the 26 chains that have been consistently part of the analysis group, we find that more than half the chains have stayed around the same position in the ranking throughout the five years. City of London, Harris, ARK and Outwood Grange have been consistently high in the ranking. Of later entrants, *Diocese of London* been also been consistently very high in our ranking. These chains vary in proportion of disadvantaged pupils, with City of London very high, and Outwood Grange only just above the national figure. They tend to be around average for pupils with low prior attainment, though Outwood Grange have more than the others. Three of them are based in London, which has for some years had higher attainment than other parts of the country.

Of the original 26 chains, the greatest improvement has been shown by Grace, moving from 25th to 8th in our ranking. Other improvers are Landau, Diocese of Oxford, United Learning and The Priory. Their improvement demonstrates what is possible, and we wish them well in maintaining their trajectory.

Woodard and AET have been near the bottom of the table for five years, as has Greenwood since 2014, together with later entrants, *Midland* and UCAT. SPTA was in a similar position but in 2017, rebranded as Delta, it has shown some improvement. A key factor here has been learning from a more successful trust; SPTA appointed a new CEO who had been deputy CEO of Outwood Grange, and entered into an agreement with that trust in relation to receiving support to improve performance. None of these chains is London-based, and while in terms of pupil intake most are more challenging than the highest achieving chains, they are not the chains with the highest levels of challenge. Woodard has fewer disadvantaged pupils than the national average.

Some of the smaller chains have had very variable results. *David Meller* (with just two sponsored KS4 academies) is an example, changing from below average to well above average and back to well below average. Similarly, *Dixons* was above average in 2013, dropped to below average the following year, but in 2017 is once again above average. It is inevitable that the performance of smaller chains will be particularly affected by changes in one of its schools (including staff changes, the quality of different pupil cohorts etc.)

Within any trust, the performance of individual schools varies hugely,[67] and when a trust takes on new schools these can have a substantial impact on the trust's attainment figures, particularly if the trust is small. This is clearly a disincentive to taking on many under-performing schools. Similarly, when the lowest performing schools in a trust are re-brokered, this can improve the trust's position in the league tables. Thus, changes in performance may not reflect any real changes in the schools involved.

Moreover, there is inevitably a degree of 'game-playing' in efforts to improve performance figures. Some chains have used the fact that only pupils who are on the roll in January of Year 11 count towards the tables as an incentive to lose, or 'off-roll' pupils who would bring results down. A recent investigation by *The Guardian* showed that nationally, the number of pupils 'off-rolled' before they take their GCSE exams has risen and was 2% in 2018 (compared with just 0.1% seven years earlier). But the loss of students in some academy trusts was very much higher. Combining figures for the last two years, Harris and Delta (formerly SPTA), lost 7% of their pupils, and Aldridge and Inspiration also lost over 5%.[68] They argue that this relates to their history and the nature of their pupil intake. Similarly, Ofsted report that academies, particularly those in some multi-academy trusts, appear to be losing proportionately more pupils than local authority schools, and that disadvantaged pupils are more likely to be off-rolled than their peers.[69] Education Datalab have investigated various ways of reweighting the data to make all pupils count in some way, and have calculated how much this would change MATs' Progress 8 scores, and show that this would reduce the Progress 8 scores of many MATs. If their suggestions were implemented, the greatest reductions in Progress 8 (over 0.1) would be experienced by *Fylde Coast*, Grace, Northern, Delta, as well as some chains which are consistently high in our ranking: Harris and Outwood Grange.[70]

Another form of 'game-playing' involves the curriculum. We referred earlier to the previous substantial use of vocational qualifications in some chains. Arguably these were appropriate for the needs of their pupils, but at the same time the lesser degree of challenge undoubtedly helped raise performance figures. A recent instance of this sort of 'game-playing' involves the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL). It was announced in March 2017 that the ECDL would no longer count in the school league tables from 2018 because it was not considered equivalent in challenge to a GCSE. MATs were far more

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[67] See Nye, 2018b.
[68] Mansell, 2018
[69] Bradbury, 2018.
[70] Nye and Thomson, 2018

likely to enter pupils for the ECDL than other schools; in some MATs, over 80% of pupils took this qualification. Analysis by Education Datalab shows that those trusts that had higher ECDL entry rates on average were more likely to have experienced falls in their P8 scores between 2017 and 2018.[71]

In conclusion, then, the characteristics below are to varying degrees associated with chains with better results:

- being longer established and having grown slowly;
- having strong experience of strategies for improving schools;
- only taking on schools that are exceptionally challenging when they have the capacity to support them;
- having fewer pupils with low prior attainment;
- having developed effective strategies to respond to national changes in the curriculum and in key performance indicators (some of which may involve 'game-playing');
- learning from the strategies used in other trusts;
- having a sustained mission and commitment to improving the education of disadvantaged pupils.

Other key findings

The impact of prior attainment

The disadvantaged group includes a disproportionate number of pupils with low prior attainment (though only a quarter of all disadvantaged pupils have low prior attainment). Figure 2 showed that considerable variation between chains in the proportion of pupils with low prior attainment, ranging from 6% to 26%. The percentage of pupils with low prior attainment is strongly correlated with the level of KS4 attainment. However, Progress 8 scores are based on prior attainment, and should eliminate differences in school intakes. In our 2017 report, we showed that pupils with low prior attainment made slightly better progress in the analysis group sponsored academies than in other sponsored academies or in other mainstream schools. However, those with high prior attainment progressed less well in sponsored academies (including those in the analysis group) than in other types of school. This pattern is shown in the national published figures for both 2016 and 2017.

Converter academies in our analysis chains

In 2017 we analysed outcomes for secondary converter academies in the chains in our analysis group. Just over a fifth of the chains had two or more converters that had been in the chain for three years. These academies on average had higher percentages of disadvantaged and of low-attaining pupils than the average for all converter academies. On average their attainment for disadvantaged and low-attaining pupils was similar to that of the sponsored academies. However, disadvantaged pupils with low prior attainment made better progress in sponsored academies than in converters, while those with high prior attainment made better progress in converters.

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[71] Nye, 2018a.

Key Stage 2

In 2017, we also investigated KS2 academies. Because of the widespread concerns about national tests at KS2, we did not use the writing test results (for which it has been argued that moderation was inconsistent across the country). Nor did we create an overall index.

Whereas in secondary there were strong relationships between prior attainment and KS4 outcomes, this was less evident at KS2. At chain level, there was no relationship between percentage of low attaining disadvantaged pupils and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.

Where chains were included in both the KS4 and KS2 analysis groups, we are able to compare their success in the two age groups. Harris, Diocese of London and ARK were successful with disadvantaged pupils in both age groups. However, United Learning achieved weaker results in primary than secondary, and Northern did better in primary. *Central Learning*, which features only in the KS2 analysis group, was also very successful.

At KS2, as at KS4, only about a quarter of the chains had enough converter academies to include in the analysis group. These converter academies had higher percentages of disadvantaged and low-attaining pupils than was average in converter academies. On average, attainment for disadvantaged pupils was slightly higher in the converters, but the picture across chains was much more varied.

7. Discussion

So, nearly two decades since the opening of the first city academy, and five years since we started our series of *Chain Effects* reports, have academies achieved their intended mission of transforming the attainment of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds?

The data overall would clearly say not. However, there are several large caveats here. One is that – as we have repeatedly shown – there are a handful of academy chains that have provided exactly the transformational outcomes that were initially anticipated by policy-makers. The other caveat is that our analysis illuminates an often over-looked point – that academy chains are in the main providing for a disproportionately disadvantaged pupil demographic; in terms of pupil prior attainment as well as socio-economic disadvantage. In this regard, academy chains have admirably stuck to their initial mission of addressing schooling in areas of social deprivation – but this also presents additional challenge in improvement. That this level of challenge was naively disregarded by policy-makers, is disappointing.

Given the overall finding that the majority of academy chains are *not* securing better outcomes for their disadvantaged pupils, coupled with the scale of funding involved in academisation,[72] and the on-going challenges with different layers and agencies necessary to regulate parallel systems, it would certainly be possible to cast academisation as an example of a 'Blunder of our Government'.[73] Critique is boosted by the point that the exclusive focus on school structures has arguably resulted in a calamitous oversight of the importance of the quality of the teaching, including the recruitment and retention of the teacher workforce. We hardly need to point to the evidence that the quality of teaching has most impact on pupil outcomes,[74] and that this is especially the case for disadvantaged pupils.[75]

Nevertheless, structures *and* content of schooling are important. There is evidence that the structure of MATs can enable them to better retain teachers and to deploy teachers into disadvantaged schools that need them.[76] It is arguable that the small number of very successful academy chains regularly highlighted in our reports demonstrate what is possible. We continue to find it perplexing that the Government has done so little to explore the methods of these successful chains and to distil learning to support other chains. We continue to call for this, and to call for the Government to drop its ideological stance in order to capitalise on the successes of a range of schooling organisations, whether MATs or Local Authorities.

Turning to our specific findings. What we notice from our data over time is several-fold:

- Some chains are realising the transformative vision envisaged at the start of the academies programme. Although growing slightly in number over time, these remain a very small minority overall.
- Meanwhile, academy chains overall underperform the mainstream average for their disadvantaged pupils (and indeed for their non-disadvantaged pupils). While some chains have improved, and others may still do so, a significant number have sat at the bottom of our league table across a range of measures, over the five years of our analysis.

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[72] Academies Commission, 2013.
[73] King & Crewe, 2014.
[74] Coe et al, 2014.
[75] Aiscow, 2010.
[76] Worth, 2017.

- In spite of this somewhat disappointing overall performance, it remains the case that academy chains are focused on providing for relatively deprived communities: the *mission* of academy sponsorship has been maintained.
- Yet, conversely, some of the academy chains in the analysis group have also responded to government accountability and incentives in ways which are arguably not necessarily in their disadvantaged students' interests. This would include entering pupils into all EBacc subjects even when they are unlikely to achieve standard level passes, as well as more dubious strategies such as off-rolling.

This last point reflects the wider context within which the academy chains are operating. Accountability measures and Ofsted inspections are a much greater threat for the schools which are least likely to meet the targets set, and so it is obviously tempting to focus on targets even when this may lead to action which is not beneficial for individuals. Off-rolling is clearly not beneficial for individual pupils. EBacc entry is more debatable.

We are aware of the evidence that a knowledge-based curriculum is related to higher remuneration post-school, as well as to access to high status educational and career routes.[77] We support Wolf's analysis that equivalent qualifications were often disadvantaging pupils who need a broad and balanced curriculum and credentials that have credibility with employers.[78] The Sutton Trust research on schools that changed their curriculum rapidly when EBacc was first introduced has shown that the disadvantaged pupils in these schools benefited.[79] But at the same time, we are aware that the contrast between EBacc entry rates and EBacc passes in some chains means that the majority of pupils failed to achieve a standard pass in at least one EBacc subject, and possibly more, and we have shown that in some chains high EBacc entry is resulting in a high proportion of grades below a standard pass. The latter cannot be in the interest of pupils. In contrast it seems other chains (and we used Outwood Grange as an example) are apparently showing far greater awareness of their pupils' exam potential in their exam entry and (closely related) outcomes, and achieving higher numbers of EBacc passes for their disadvantaged pupils in the process, than are those that enter far higher numbers for the EBacc.

When pupils believe they have failed, this affects their self-esteem and self-confidence, qualities that are very much needed the adult world[80] – in addition to the material impact that loss of GCSE credentials makes to pupils' future employability, further educational access, and so on. The Sutton Trust research reported that despite the positive outcomes of the shift to EBacc, the headteachers involved believed that it would not be a suitable curriculum for up to 30% of their pupils. Thus the government decision to set a 90% target for EBacc entry, and to make EBacc entry an accountability measure, is at least questionable. We believe that the current emphasis on EBacc entry is unnecessary: Attainment 8 and Progress 8 offer sufficient incentive to encourage schools to offer all their pupils a broad and balanced curriculum that has academic depth, but also allows individuals to follow their preferences and aptitudes (including the possible inclusion of a limited number of vocational qualifications). There is no need for a narrower stipulation beyond this.

Academy chains have been faced with many challenges over the last few years. The move to use pupil progress as the key measure of performance has been beneficial, with fewer of the analysis group academies schools falling below the floor target. But at the same time, the chains have been expected to take on more schools that been judged Inadequate and need a great deal of support to improve. They

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[77] Ianelli 2013.
[78] Wolf, 2012.
[79] Allen & Thomson, 2016.
[80] Hutchings, 2015.

have also had to move to a more academic and challenging curriculum. This change has been very much more challenging in schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils where a more vocational curriculum was in place, and has had implications for staffing and resources. These new demands have come at a time when school funding levels have been reduced, and there are shortages of teachers in some academic subjects – particularly maths, science and languages. It would be helpful if there was now a period of stability.

It is also urgent to recruit more teachers in the secondary subjects suffering shortages, and to find ways of making teaching in schools in deprived areas more attractive. The accountability system is currently perceived to be skewed in favour of schools with more affluent intakes where it is much easier to achieve the required levels of performance.[81] Those working in schools in areas of deprivation, which face much greater challenges, tend to feel threatened. This does not make working in such schools an attractive proposition. There needs to be a greater level of recognition of the challenges involved.

We have consistently stressed the need for weaker academy chains to learn from those that are more effective, and for RSCs to ensure that MATs have effective school improvement strategies. But we also believe that there are wider changes (concerning, for example, accountability measures, curriculum, teacher recruitment and retention) that are needed to enable chains to do a better job.

Our recommendations are at the front of the report. We hope they will be heeded in refocusing energy on delivering the best from groups of academies, for the benefit of their disadvantaged pupils.

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[81] Schools with a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils are more likely to be judged by Ofsted as Requires Improvement or Inadequate. See Thomson, 2018.

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Appendix A: Key performance measures

EBacc is the most demanding of the accountability measures. To achieve the EBacc a pupil must gain standard or strong passes at GCSE in five core academic subject areas: English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences and a language.

Attainment 8 is based on pupils' average attainment (whether or not a C grade is achieved) across eight subjects. These include the five EBacc subjects, and three further subjects, which can be from those specified for EBacc or can be any other approved, high-value arts, academic, or vocational qualifications.[82]

Progress 8 is the most important measure in terms of accountability, since it is used for the floor standard. It is based on the same subjects as Attainment 8, but measures pupil progress between KS2 and KS4, using a pupil's KS2 results in English and mathematics as a baseline. It is calculated by comparing the Attainment 8 score of each pupil with the average score of all pupils nationally who had the same attainment level at KS2. Thus, the greater the Progress 8 score, the greater progress made in comparison with pupils with similar KS2 attainment.

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[82] The DfE (2017c) report a strong correlation (correlation coefficient 0.90) at Local Authority level between average Attainment 8 scores and the previous key measure of attainment, percentage achieving 5 A*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent.

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