

Exploring multi-academy trust approaches to artificial intelligence

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About the Education Policy Institute

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

can support interventions, such as identifying attendance issues, though ethical challenges remain, particularly around decision-making transparency.

How are MATs implementing AI?

The government has invested in AI development through support for the content store, connectivity improvements, and resources like Oak National Academy's AI tools.⁴ Despite this, roundtable participants reported a gap between AI's promised benefits and actual impact.

¹ Sampson and Pothong, 'A Learning Curve?'

² Ofsted, "'The Biggest Risk Is Doing Nothing": Insights from Early Adopters of Artificial Intelligence in Schools and Further Education Colleges.'

³ Sampson and Pothong, 'A Learning Curve?'

⁴ Department for Education, 'Teachers to Get More Trustworthy AI Tech, Helping Them Mark Homework and Save Time'

that best suit their context. Therefore, trusts may need to define which decisions occur at the trust level – such as approving AI tools – and which are delegated to schools or classrooms, like integrating AI into lessons.

Trusts inevitably have to balance short-term goals with long-term considerations like evolving technology, contract lengths, and value for money. Decision-making also needs to allow for relationships with unions, parents, local authorities, and regulators, requiring stakeholder engagement to address concerns about workforce implications and pupil use.

Finally, while guidance recommends evidence-based decisions, robust research on AI effectiveness in education is limited. Larger MATs may conduct internal evaluations or hire independent assessors, but smaller trusts often lack resources, relying instead on staff feedback and peer recommendations. This limits their ability to make data-driven decisions, underscoring the need for sector-wide collaboration and clearer frameworks.

How are MATs measuring the effectiveness of AI?

participants reported promoting safe usage through AI literacy programs, continuing professional development, and technical controls. Due diligence includes risk assessments, negotiating terms, and implementing safety policies. Participants also noted that AI can have an impact on relationships between parents and schools – including using AI to generate complaints – adding to workload.

AI tools are largely developed by private companies, with trusts having to accept standard terms and conditions that do not necessarily reflect their educational contexts. Larger trusts reported being better placed to negotiate and conduct due diligence, while smaller trusts face resource burdens. Roundtable participants were also mindful of being reliant on providers who may not be able to provide support – or themselves be sustainable in the longer terms – or whose incentives and motivations did not necessarily align with their own.

Finally, AI adoption highlights inequalities: some schools have advanced technologies, while others lack aspects of digital infrastructure, widening the digital divide. These disparities risk exacerbating existing inequalities between schools and pupils.

Methodology

Literature review

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solely focusing on higher education was excluded. A total of 20 articles and reports passed screening and were read in their entirety to inform our findings. Those papers are listed in the accompanying bibliography.

Roundtables

In late 2025, we convened two roundtables bringing together MAT leaders and those leading on digital strategy within their trusts, with other AI in education stakeholders. Roundtable discussion centred around how MATs are approaching the challenges and harnessing the opportunities of AI and understanding how AI tools are being implemented and evaluated across trusts.

⁵ The following string was used: (“AI” OR “artificial intelligence”) AND (“teaching” OR “teacher” OR “teachers” OR “classroom”) and results were filtered for articles published from 2023 to present day.

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Part 1: How are MATs using artificial intelligence?

Reducing and managing teacher workload

communication tasks, such as drafting emails to parents or summarising student progress for stakeholders, freeing valuable teacher time.⁹ One risk in using AI for such tasks is that AI tools have not necessarily been trained on data that is specific to the school system in England, and it is why the UK Government has invested in the “content store” of reliable data.¹⁰

While AI offers potential and use cases to help manage and support teacher workloads, MAT leaders caution that its impact on teacher retention may be overstated. Given the breadth and intensity of responsibilities already faced by teachers, many are sceptical that teachers will feel

⁶ Martin, ‘Workload review’

⁷ Department for Education, ‘Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Education’

⁸ Roy et al., ‘ChatGPT in Lesson Preparation - A Teacher Choices Trial’

⁹ Ofsted, ‘The Biggest Risk Is Doing Nothing: Insights from Early Adopters of Artificial Intelligence in Schools and Further Education Colleges’

¹⁰ Department for Education, ‘Teachers to Get More Trustworthy AI Tech, Helping Them Mark Homework and Save Time’

Supporting personalised learning

“We feel passionately that teaching is here to stay. Teaching is the fundamental part of what we do, the human connection.”

Aspects of teaching delivery may call for more novel forms of AI beyond virtual learning platforms, adaptive learning systems, and generative AI tools. Virtual assistants or immersive virtual reality technologies may offer the potential to directly support teaching delivery. Exploring how AI can be used to support students with learning difficulties, Dieker et al. explored how AI can be used to support students through the use of virtual assistants integrated directly into four inclusive

¹¹ Bessemer, 'AI In Education'

¹² National Education Association, 'Report of the NEA Task Force on Artificial Intelligence in Education'

¹³ Fletcher-Wood, 'How to Improve Behaviour and Wellbeing, and How You're Using AI in Schools'

¹⁴ Samson and Pothong, 'A Learning Curve?'

¹⁵ Dieker et al., 'Using an Artificial Intelligence (AI) Agent to Support Teacher Instruction and Student Learning'

¹⁶ Department for Education, 'The Safe and Effective Use of AI in Education - Leadership Toolkit Video Transcripts'

Improving school administrative processes

Artificial intelligence (AI) can be applied to support the administrative and back-office functions of multi-academy trusts. While these uses are often less visible than classroom applications, they offer opportunities for improving operational efficiency and effectiveness.

Financial management. As in other sectors, AI has the potential to support MATs in financial forecasting and in data informed decision making.²⁰ One roundtable participant noted how trusts use AI for invoice matching, increasing administrative efficiency.

¹⁷ Dieker et al., 'Using an Artificial Intelligence (AI) Agent to Support Teacher Instruction and Student Learning'.

¹⁸ Chiu et al., 'Teacher Support and Student Motivation to Learn with Artificial Intelligence (AI) Based Chatbot'.

¹⁹ Ling, 'Use Cases for Generative AI in Education: User Research Report'.

²⁰ Altair, 'How AI Can Transform Education: Practical Insights for Multi Academy Trusts (MATs)'.

²¹ Ofsted, 'The Biggest Risk Is Doing Nothing'.

²² AI in Education, 'Shape of the Future'.

²³ Keer, 'The Risks and Benefits of Using Artificial Intelligence to Power EHCPs'.

²⁴ McManus, 'Why Firms Are Merging HR and IT Departments'.

²⁵ Samson and Pothong, 'A Learning Curve?'

Part 2: How are MATs implementing artificial intelligence?

Strategies for implementation

Bottom-up approaches

necessarily surprising, as similar trends have been seen with other technologies. Trust leaders highlight the need for bottom-up approaches in the context of a rapidly evolving AI market, where new tools and capabilities are constantly emerging, making top-down management challenging. By building from the ground up, trusts can ‘meet teachers where they are’, tailoring policies and support to the feedback they receive from teachers on what is working and what is not working for teaching and learning. Furthermore, bottom-up approaches ensure that teacher autonomy is preserved, allowing teachers to drive best-usage and practice.

Trusts can also facilitate bottom-up approaches through small piloting and trialling programmes that can be used to develop implementation strategies.²⁹ Starting small enables trusts to observe

²⁶ Department for Education, ‘AI in Schools and Colleges’.

²⁷ Department for Education, ‘AI in Schools and Colleges’.

²⁸ Latham and Montacute, ‘Artificial Advantage? AI in the Classroom and the Inequality Gap’.

²⁹ Bessemer, ‘AI In Education’; ‘Ling, Use Cases for Generative AI in Education: User Research Report’.

Top-down approaches

“We’ve not launched an AI policy, we’re gradually baking in decision making into every other standard of our work because it’s just business as usual”.

So, schools may make amendments to policies surrounding data privacy or safeguarding to reflect the impact of AI.

Users of this approach argued it enables them to stop ‘putting the tool first’ and instead focus on teachers and students. Regardless of the approach, the strength of the MAT system is that it places these decisions in the trusts’ remit, enabling them to tailor their approach to AI to their trusts’ specific needs.

One of the most common themes within the current literature that was consistently echoed by roundtable participants, is the need for AI adoption to be informed by a specific educational goal. Whether that goal is to improve administrative efficiency, to reduce teacher lesson planning time, or to improve pupil outcomes, it is vital that trusts ensure there is a clear and transparent aim and actionable approach to achieving said aim through use of AI. MAT leaders specifically highlighted

Engagement with national networks

Role of central leadership

Developing useful narratives around AI

Building and sustaining expertise

Helping central teams disseminate knowledge and craft useful narratives around AI are ‘AI champions.’³¹ AI champions are appointed leaders who have expertise both within education and within the technological sector.³² Central teams noted how helpful these roles are in building and sustaining expertise on effective use of AI and many felt that appointing digital leads is no longer something optional for their schools. Instead, designated responsibility to oversee AI, digital skills, technology was seen as something that should be engaged in with the same intensity as safeguarding and attendance.

³⁰ AI in Education, ‘Shape of the Future’.

³¹ *ibid*

³² Ofsted, ‘The Biggest Risk Is Doing Nothing’.

Accountability

Larger trusts are more easily able to hold providers to account and due to their large size and resourcing have more power to negotiate terms and conditions within contracts. This underlines the necessity of national oversight to ensure that even smaller trusts and school groups are able to advocate for safe use of technology with providers.

But larger trusts can also face challenges in developing solutions that work across their schools, particularly when schools have freedom over issues such as curriculum and exam boards.

“All of our academies are different. They're on different curriculums, they're on different timetables, they're on different exam boards and trying to make it bespoke for each of the academies is our greatest barrier at the moment.”

³³ AI in Education, ‘Shape of the Future’.

Part 3: How do MATs make decisions regarding AI?

Scaffolding decision-making responsibility

“When we first had our AI strategy we found out people weren’t using it. We realised it doesn’t apply to geography teachers, it doesn’t apply to IT, it doesn’t apply to use PE. So now we have a primary strategy and we have a secondary strategy, but now we’re going to have a subject strategy as well”

Teachers in different subjects or in different settings will use AI differently and require different training, support, and accountability. Where there are designated AI leads, they can support tailored, contextually specific decisions about AI.

Balancing short-term and long-term goals

When making decisions, MATs will naturally need to balance short-term and long-term goals. In the short term, it is important that trusts consider ‘What problem are we trying to solve?’ and decisions about AI use should be led by pedagogical theory and clear educational goals. In the

³⁴ Latham and Montacute, ‘Artificial Advantage? AI in the Classroom and the Inequality Gap’.

Using evidence and research

³⁵ Ofsted, 'The Biggest Risk Is Doing Nothing'.

³⁶ Bessemer, 'AI In Education'.

³⁷ Chartered College of Teaching, '*Edtech Evidence Board Project*'.

Part 4: How are MATs evaluating the effectiveness of AI?

What are MATs measuring?

How are MATs measuring effectiveness?

Roundtable participants reported measuring and evaluating AI use through surveys, stakeholder feedback, and anecdotal evidence. Through surveys, trusts had been able to collect both quantitative measures regarding use, as well as qualitative indicators of teachers' and pupils' perception and experiences. Capturing both these elements is a vital part of successful evaluation⁴⁰, yet evaluation through surveys can make it difficult to disentangle the effects of AI specifically and feedback can be subject to other contextual factors. Roundtable participants also emphasised the importance of measures needing to be disaggregated so that an evaluation can analyse effectiveness across different characteristics. For example, it is important for trusts to know if AI is more effective for their lower or higher attaining students, or if more or less experienced teachers find it more useful for lesson-planning.

³⁸ AI in Education, 'Shape of the Future'.

³⁹ Samson and Pothong, 'A Learning Curve? '.

⁴⁰ Ofsted, 'The Biggest Risk Is Doing Nothing'.

⁴¹ Latham and Montacute, 'Artificial Advantage? AI in the Classroom and the Inequality Gap'.

⁴² Baxter, 'Teachers Using ChatGPT – alongside a Guide to Support Them to Use It Effectively – Can Cut Lesson Planning Time by over 30 per Cent'.

⁴³ Chartered College of Teaching, 'Edtech Evidence Board Project'.

⁴⁴ Department for Education, 'Education Secretary Outlines Plans to Modernise Education Sector'.

Part 5: Legal and ethical considerations

Upholding data protection

Navigating commercial landscapes and market realities

administrative burden.

Many EdTech and AI tool providers are small operations, relying on limited staff and infrastructure to support their AI tool. These smaller providers are riskier for schools to invest in as their sustainability is more dependent on variability in the commercial market. One roundtable participant highlighted this issue, noting that their trust takes measures to ensure that such small-scale providers tools do not have a 'strategic' role in their trust. Building on this, participants noted that it was important for trusts to 'know who they are dealing with' and to understand that these providers' incentives and motivations may not always align with trusts' goals. Particularly, several participants voiced concerns that many providers, including big players like Google and

⁴⁵ Samson and Pothong, '*A Learning Curve?*'.

⁴⁶ Department for Education, '*Data Protection in Schools - Data Protection Policies and Procedures - Guidance - GOV.UK*'.

⁴⁷ AI in Education, '*Shape of the Future*'.

Mitigating bias and risk

safely, understand and negotiate terms and conditions with providers, conduct DPIAs and risk-assessments, and develop their own technical controls and appropriate use policies.

Trusts also need to be alert to the impact that AI can potentially have on the relationships between pupils and teachers and between schools and parents. One participant noted that teachers were once asking whether pupils were using AI to provide answers but now pupils are asking whether teachers are using AI to plan their lessons. In addition:

“What we’ve heard quite a lot is schools talking about the impact of parents using AI to generate complaint emails.”

⁴⁸ Samson and Pothong, ‘A Learning Curve?’.

⁴⁹ Altair, ‘How AI Can Transform Education: Practical Insights for Multi Academy Trusts (MATs)’.

Addressing inequalities and the digital divide

AI implementation to their specific context, variation in access is concerning. One trust leader noted that while their trust has mandated that all schools provide AI literacy training to their staff, this is not happening in practice. This example demonstrates the importance of trust leadership in managing and addressing inequalities within their school group, particularly when it comes to AI. Similarly, trusts have responsibility for addressing inequalities between pupils. Initiatives, such as supporting 1:1 pupil to device ratios, can help mitigate the digital divides between pupils.

⁵⁰Latham and Montacute, 'Artificial Advantage? AI in the Classroom and the Inequality Gap'.

Conclusion and recommendations

for education providers AND for initial teacher training programmes.

The participants at our roundtables were very conscious of the issue of the digital divide and highlighted disparities within their own trusts, both for individual pupils and within academies.

There were, almost inevitably, differences in the experiences of large and small academy trusts. Larger trusts were better placed to have dedicated AI champions and data protection experts who could work across schools in the trust, and they also potentially have the capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of different tools. However, being in a larger trust is not without its own issues. Participants reported that they can often struggle to be on top of all the ways that AI is being used across the hundreds of teachers that they have, particularly when academies can have different approaches to the curriculum.

Recommendation 3: Larger trusts should lead networks of support working with both smaller trusts and individual schools with the Department for Education considering ways that this could be incentivised. The Department for Education and the Department for

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Annex



Annex A: Roundtable discussion questions

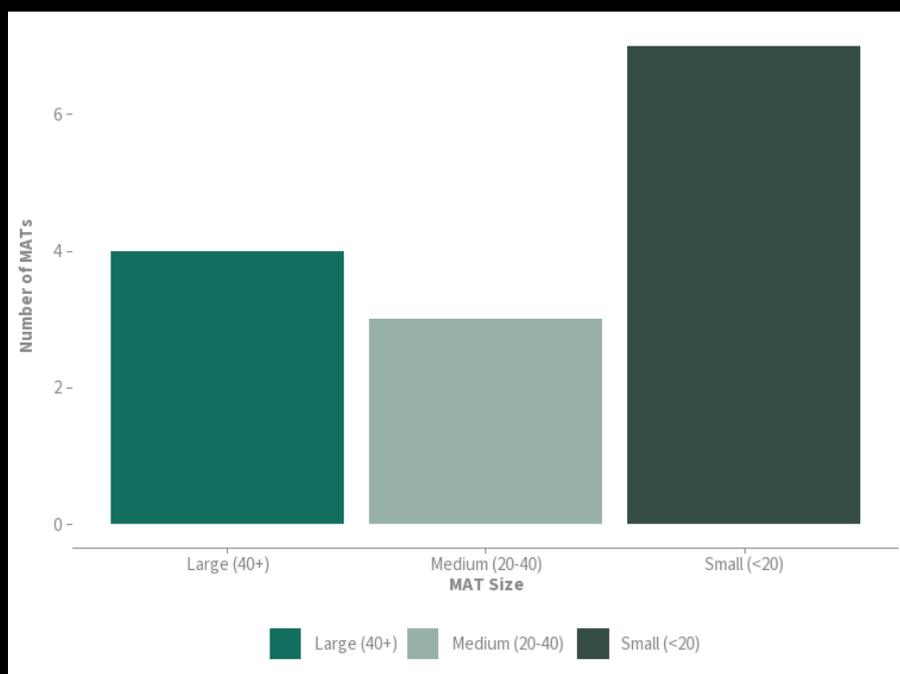
RT 1: How are MATs harnessing the opportunities and approaching the challenges of AI?

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RT 2: How are MATs developing their approach to AI strategy, governance and efficacy measurement?

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- Who is involved in making decisions about AI adoption and use? How are responsibilities distributed or delegated across MATs?
- How are legal and ethical considerations managed in MATs (i.e. data privacy, safeguarding)?
- What stakeholders are involved in supporting schools to make safe and effective decisions on AI? How are responsibilities delegated to external stakeholders?

Annex B: Roundtable participants



small subset of other establishments such as all-through schools, special schools, alternative provision, or 16-plus institutions.

Figure 2: Multi-academy trust roundtable participants by school phase representation

Primary	204
Secondary	197
Other	34

7 other representatives from key organisations were also present, including governmental bodies, charities, AI providers, and other professional educational bodies.