

Different types of academies in England: impact beyond exams

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What we found

- Following conversion, converter academies enrol pupils with higher ability and a more advantaged background, whereas sponsor-led academies become slightly skewed towards low ability disadvantaged pupils.
- Attending a sponsor-led academy increases pupils' self-esteem.
- Pupils at converter academies are more likely to study science and facilitating subjects at age 14.
- Pupils at converter academies improve decision-making skills.

The academy policy in England

English academies are state-funded schools that are managed outside of local authority (LA) control and enjoy greater autonomy. 'Sponsor-led' academies were introduced by the Labour government in 2002 to target underperforming schools, but the programme was vastly expanded after the coalition government introduced 'converter' academies in 2010. Sponsor-led academies are forced to convert under an external sponsor whereas converter academies voluntarily apply for academy status.

The academy policy aims to foster an innovative school-led system through school competition and parental choice. Autonomous schools are supposed to better understand pupils' needs and make decisions that meet their preferences and improve performance so to attract pupils and funding. Similar reforms are found in the United States (charter schools) and Sweden (free schools).

This research looks beyond exams

While most of the empirical literature on academies focuses on exam performance, my research evaluates the impact of academy conversion on a wider range of outcomes – highlighting wider consequences of school autonomy.

Indeed, league tables and school competition might draw academies to 'rote' teaching focused on exam preparation, neglecting problem-solving skills, social skills, mental health, and self-esteem. Thus, this research aims to address the following questions. Are pupils at academies developing key social and problem-solving skills? Is a learning environment focused on exam performance leading to increased pupil anxiety at academies? Is there an effect on pupils' mental health and wellbeing?

Furthermore, schools might offer different pathways to pupils from different socioeconomic backgrounds, entering them for qualifications likely to improve school ranking scores but limiting future opportunities for children. I therefore investigate whether school counselling and the curriculum offer at academies limit subject choices, requiring pupils to study certain subjects and preventing them from taking others.

The research methods

This study uses rich longitudinal data from the Millennium Cohort Study coupled with quasi-experimental quantitative methods to establish causality. Where individual outcomes are measured at different ages, a differences-in-differences framework is applied, highlighting progression and removing time invariant confounders. I focus on pupils who are already attending the school prior to academy conversion to bypass selection issues (so called, legacy enrolment). Analysis of pupil intakes compares already-converted schools with future-converting schools, assuming that the timing of academy conversion is unrelated to school characteristics.

Findings

Academy route	Sponsor-led	Converter
	Forced conversion on under-performing schools	Voluntary conversion without sponsor
Pupil intakes	Attracts more low ability disadvantaged pupils	Enrols more high ability advantaged pupils
Subject choice (age 14)	No change	More likely to choose science and facilitating subjects
Cognitive skills	No change	Improves decision-making
Non-cognitive skills	Raises self-esteem	No change

Following conversion, converter academies enrol pupils with higher ability and a more advantaged background, whereas sponsor-led academies become slightly skewed towards low ability disadvantaged pupils

- Converter academies tend to improve their pupil intake in terms of ability and socio-economic background (income, parental occupation and education).
- Sponsor-led academies attract more pupils with lower ability, special education needs and eligibility for free school meals.
- This suggests that schools are becoming more stratified, with pupils from different backgrounds segregated in different schools.

Pupils at converter academies improve decision-making skills

- Pupils attending converter academies significantly improve their problem-solving and decision-making skills in comparison with similar peers at maintained schools. Pupils at converter academies make optimal choices more often. These typically high performing schools foster wide cognitive skills that go beyond exam preparation.
- I find no evidence of improvement on non-cognitive skills at converter academies. Apparently, these academies are not targeting non-cognitive outcomes.

Pupils at converter academies are more likely to study science and facilitating subjects at age 14

- Pupils at converter academies are significantly more likely to study science subjects and facilitating subjects than their peers at maintained schools. Pupils at these schools may have a different choice set of options, expectations and guidance.
- A more science-based curriculum could help explain why we find there better decision-making skills.
- Since converter academies have more advantaged intakes, these results may raise concerns for social mobility.

Attending a sponsor-led academy increases pupils' self-esteem

- Pupils enrolled in sponsor-led academies have greater self-esteem than their peers at maintained schools.

This boost in satisfaction could be related to efforts in developing a new identity and disciplinary climate at these previously underperforming schools.

- Subject choices of pupils attending sponsor-led academies and maintained schools are generally identical.
- I do not find cognitive improvements in pupils attending sponsor-led academies.

What does this mean for policy makers?

This research reveals a key insight: conversion affects pupil outcomes differently depending on the academy route taken. Increased social stratification between sponsor-led academies and converter academies, with the latter having more advantaged intakes, raises important equity concerns. The improvement in problem-solving skills of pupils attending converter academies, coupled with a more science-based and academically oriented curriculum, gives these pupils an additional advantage in pursuing high-status careers. Since these effects are not observed at sponsor-led academies, that typically attract more disadvantaged intakes, the academy programme seems likely to hinder social mobility. Moreover, this raises questions on how reported gains at national exams from sponsor-led academies are attained – are these schools teaching to the test or adopting other ranking maximising strategies?

Looking into non-cognitive outcomes leads us to an unsettling conclusion. Pupils at converter academies do not significantly improve their non-cognitive skills in relation to their peers. The same can be said of sponsor-led academies, except for self-esteem. Apparently, academies are not incentivised to target non-cognitive outcomes. Since non-cognitive skills are critical for later life outcomes, this should be a priority.

An important implication of these results is the need for a reappraisal of the incentives and mechanisms currently driving the school system. Policy makers must take responsibility over school outcomes, setting the purpose of state education and designing school incentives accordingly.

References

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Other information

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Further information

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