



## Should Universities and Colleges sponsor Academies?

**There are 83 Academies open so far, another 50 are in the process of being set up to open in September 2008 and the government wants to establish 400. Over 30 English universities are involved or in discussions.**

### What are Academies?

Academies are 'independent' state-funded schools. They are schools owned and controlled by a 'sponsor' outside of the democratically elected local education authority. For this reason opponents often describe academies as a form of privatisation. Originally the sponsor – usually a business, 'philanthropic' or religious organisation - had to give £2 million and in return they got around £30 million of new buildings as well as an enhanced revenue from taxation.

The sponsor controls the curriculum. They appoint staff and determine pay and conditions. They have substantial control over admissions and exclusions, and some have introduced tests or draconian disciplinary codes to re-engineer their population.

Since its inception the academies programme has been mired in controversy. The cash for honours scandal and local protests by parents & teachers made sponsoring less attractive to business. It became clear that many private sponsors had little to offer. In desperation the government sought new types of sponsors, often dropping the requirement to donate £2 million. Courting the universities as potential sponsors has become a key part of the government's strategy, although attracting education providers from abroad is also important.

### Are Academies succeeding?

Lord Adonis, the minister responsible for the programme, is keen to claim success for the new academies. Much of this was based on the spurious equivalence of a GNVQ pass with four A\*-C grades at GCSE, which produced inflated statistics. It then became clear that the pupil population was changing:

fewer pupils on free school meals, and a large recruitment of new pupils from outside the immediate area. Once these factors are taken into account, results have improved very little. This is another reason why the government are seeking university sponsors.

Given the huge resources pumped into them, one would expect academies to have better results, but their impact on other schools is a further major concern. There are already other schemes – such as Excellence in the Cities, acknowledged in government documents as more effective - to help schools that are struggling.

The government claim academies are part of a 'social justice' strategy of helping the most needy schools, yet private independent schools are now becoming academies to benefit from state funding. Academies are taking extra resources to the benefit of a minority.

It is likely that the long term consequence will be greater social segregation – already a serious issue given the degree of market competition between schools. Indeed OECD research on schools internationally shows that 'the greater diversity of types of school, the greater social segregation'. Academies threaten to recreate a tiered system of education, in much the same way that the grammar/secondary modern system did, and on top of the existing private sector.

### So what does it mean for universities?

There are two main issues. First is the broader issue of social justice and widening participation. FE and university lecturers know that the nature of the education system is one of the key benchmarks of social justice in a society. A society that does not

promote a free and fair education with an equal opportunity for all is a society that is retreating from social justice. Academies are not fee paying or directly profit making, but they are certainly not fair.

The government argues that sponsoring an academy will help widen participation. In Jan 2008 Bill Rammell argued that ‘to quicken the pace of change, we need now to address widening participation by strengthening the structural links between schools, colleges and universities. For universities, direct engagement with secondary education is the natural next step in widening participation.’

Yet as our case study of UCL sponsorship in Camden shows, the exclusive relationship established by sponsorship is more likely to undermine partnership and thereby limit participation.

University- and college-sponsored academies will do nothing to address the real barriers such as rising student fees, student debt and child poverty.

### The nature of sponsorship

But the second issue, and perhaps the most important, is to be found in the nature of sponsorship. Universities and colleges have always worked in partnership with schools. As the insert shows, there are many successful schemes operating. Partnership is very different from sponsorship, as the government admits. The DIUS suggests the role of a university as sponsor is ‘taking a leadership role on the governing body, setting goals and standards, determining academic, curriculum and admissions strategy, hiring and managing top staff, in short running the new academy.’

University sponsorship, like private business sponsorship, undermines local democracy, including directly elected staff and parent representatives on governing bodies. Sponsors have potentially autocratic powers. The governance of universities scarcely promises increased democracy in sponsored schools.

Most colleges and universities have their hands full running their own organizations, and staff are overstretched. Why should they take on running another, different and complex organization? Why should sponsorship be more helpful than partnership?

Unfortunately the involvement of some vice chancellors in the high profile promotion of academy sponsorship has led to suspicions similar to the cash for honours scandal. It also reeks of exclusivity. Vice Chancellors may proclaim sponsoring an academy is being done in the name of social justice, but the reality is that the university sponsored school will be seen as ‘better’ than other schools. The hierarchy will be strengthened.

Another danger is that FE College sponsorship might lead to a distortion of the school curriculum, focusing it increasingly on specific vocational training to the

neglect of broader social and cultural development.

University and College expertise is important for secondary schools, but the sectors are very different. The skills and experiences of school teachers are very different to those of lecturers. They can learn from each other, but as equal partners, not through ‘sponsorship’. In some areas, there are plans to sponsor a number of schools, in effect becoming a mini education authority. But what experience and what mandate do they have to run our schools? And what recourse does the local community have to challenge the decisions of university sponsors if it all goes wrong?

The academy programme is a controversial experiment that runs contrary to social justice. Involvement as sponsors carries the threat of reputational damage. Instead universities and colleges should concentrate on widening participation by expanding and developing partnerships schemes.

#### Partnership not sponsorship

- Many colleges and universities run schemes to invite school students for taster sessions
- Many university lecturers participate in schools as governors elected voluntarily by their local community. In academies, only the sponsors can appoint governors.
- Some education faculties already have strong partnerships with schools in initial teacher education, professional development and performance evaluation.
- Some Colleges and universities work in collaboration with schools to produce an exciting, varied and engaging curriculum.

#### A case study

UCL is planning to sponsor an academy in the London borough of Camden.

The site chosen is in one of the wealthiest part of the borough, not in the area to south of the borough where a new school really is needed. Malcolm Provost, the VC claims the school will be a “centre of excellence”, but local head teachers, parents and governors fear it will skew the intake of other Camden schools.

Camden is one of the most successful education authorities in the country. Local campaigners argue the UCL academy has nothing to do helping areas of need, promoting social justice or widening participation.

#### Academies: university and college sponsors

- UWE - City Academy, Bristol
- Liverpool University - North Liverpool Academy
- Barnfield College - Barnfield West Academy, Barnfield South Academy
- Coventry City College - Swanswell Academy
- Oxford Brookes - The Oxford Academy
- Bristol University - Merchants' Academy Withywood
- Nottingham University - Samworth University Academy
- Manchester City College - Health Academy, Manchester Digital Communications Academy, Manchester Academy
- Sheffield Hallam - Derbyshire Academy
- Liverpool Hope - St. Helen's Academy
- Birmingham City University - Eastside Academy
- University of Chester and West Cheshire College - South Area Academy