SCHOOLS & ACADEMIES SHOW — RESEARCH SERIES

EXPLORATORY REPORT

Business Innovation in Multi-Academy Trusts

Initial findings and overview of the SAAS research project thus far.

30% of the annual Schools & Academies Show audience comes from MAT central offices, with a further 20% from academies within MATs — so we asked what actually helps, or hampers, business innovation across the trust sector.

The SAAS Content Team set out to explore the organisational features of multi-academy trusts that support or hamper innovation in business practices. Survey results and in-depth interviews are still under way, and results and conclusions are still pending — but this article gives subscribers and show visitors an early look at the process and what we're finding so far.

Taking a resource-based view of the tangible and non-tangible features of trusts, the project set out to answer three primary questions:

01 **What are the types of business innovation trusts are involved in?**

02 **What are the features of trusts that support innovation?**

03 **What are the features of trusts that hamper innovation?**

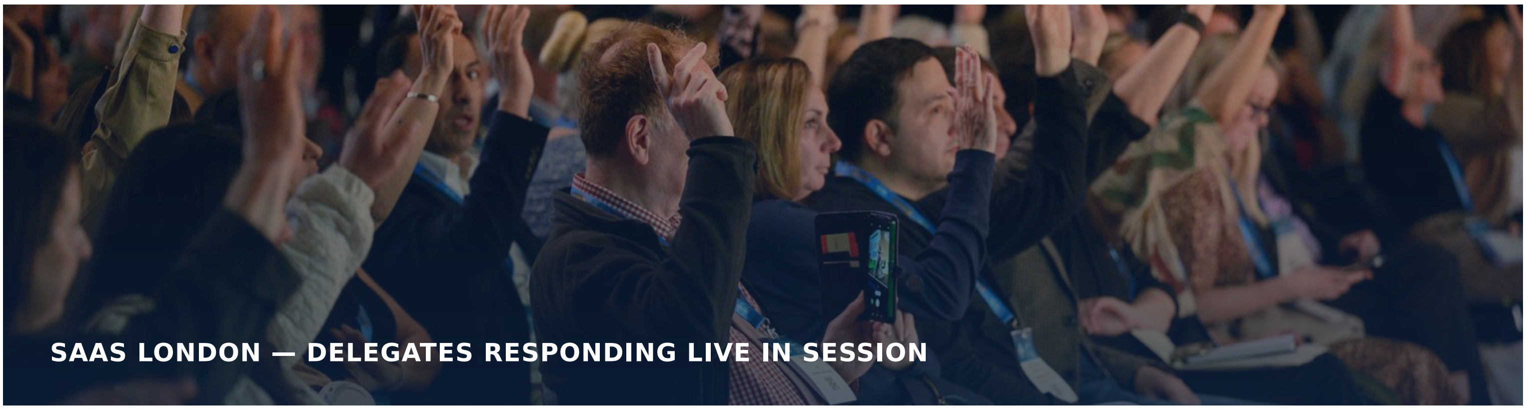
There is little published work on this topic, yet as the trust sector continues to expand, the area is of growing interest and importance. This small-scale study — so far 20 respondents across 16 semi-structured interviews — is not generalisable at this stage. We do, however, believe it's relatable, and that the topic of trust business management remains generally under-researched. This project, in some small way, looks to address that.

Who We Spoke To

Respondents span the senior leadership of trusts, from finance and operations through to estates and transformation roles.

Job title	Respondents
Chief Financial Officer	5
Estate / Facilities Manager	4
Chief Executive Officer	4
Chief Operating Officer	2
Chief Financial Officer & Operations Officer	1
Head of Shared Services	1
Director of Finance and Procurement	1
Trustee — Multi-Academy Trust Expert	1
Role relating to transformation*	1

**To protect the anonymity of this respondent, the title has been reduced.*



SAAS LONDON — DELEGATES RESPONDING LIVE IN SESSION

What "Innovation" Means in a Trust

> ***Innovation to me means doing something that is new and different to solve a problem.***
>
> **Chief Finance Officer**

> ***We're always, always looking for administrative improvements.***
>
> **Head of Shared Services**

> ***It's about trying not to do the same things over and over and get the same results.***
>
> **Chief Executive Officer**

From the initial findings, business innovation appears to be understood less as the creation of entirely new products or commercial ventures, and more as finding better, more efficient and more sustainable ways of operating.

That said, commercial ventures within MATs are worth examining closely, given the complexity and the benefits they can yield. Trusts are generating additional revenue through traded services, consultancy, estate lettings and community cafes, among other routes — and outside this research, examples are easy to find on the Department for Education's Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool.

£6.8m

Self-generated revenue at L.E.A.D. Academy Trust in 2024–25, on top of £85m in grant funding — 8% of the total. Generated in part through IT and professional development services.

Source: DfE Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool

£5.4m

Additional revenue at The CAM Academy Trust in 2024–25, on top of £61m in grant funding — 8.9% of the total, including nearly £2m from letting sports facilities alone.

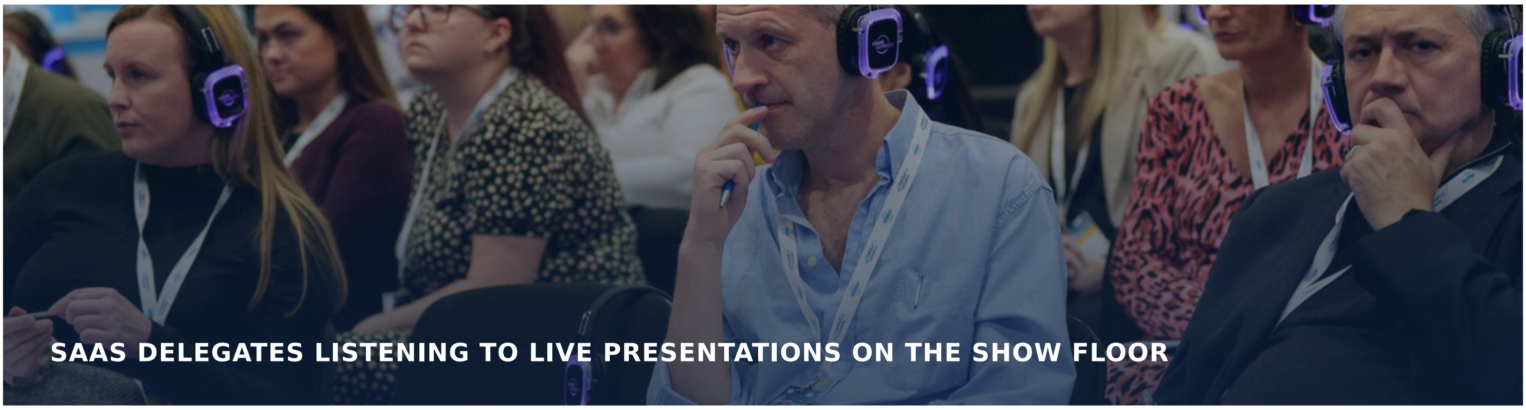
Source: DfE Financial Benchmarking and Insights Tool

These examples show how sophisticated and impactful commercial ventures in MATs are becoming. But more broadly, the literature suggests public sector organisations often lack the capability and capacity to implement such innovations at parity with the private sector (Capriati & Divella, 2022). It would be misleading to suggest all trusts are equally proficient at generating revenue on this scale.

One possible support structure for MATs implementing this kind of innovative change is cross-sector partnership, and leveraging the wider organisational field of education (Flood, 2019; Secundo et al., 2019). As the need for MAT leaders to also be business leaders grows, the composition of professional networks for MAT leadership may warrant further exploration. Hallinger and Snidvongs (2008) suggest that schools mimicking business practices, and having access to business networks, both support innovation — so CPD or development opportunities that connect MAT leaders to business networks could meaningfully aid innovation in their settings.

Beyond commercial ventures, the practices identified in the research so far include:

- Digital transformation
- Automation
- Improved procurement processes
- Novel approaches to estates management
- Improved data use
- Organisational redesign
- New approaches to resource deployment



SAAS DELEGATES LISTENING TO LIVE PRESENTATIONS ON THE SHOW FLOOR

What Supports It, and What Holds It Back

> ***We're actively encouraged to, you know, make our own destiny.***
>
> **Chief Executive Officer**

A particularly strong emerging finding is that MATs can provide real organisational conditions for innovation — facilitated by working at scale, centralised services, specialist expertise, strong leadership, and the ability to implement change across multiple schools. But innovation is also constrained by a broad set of factors.

What supports innovation

- Working at scale
- Centralised services
- Specialist expertise
- Strong leadership
- Robust, accurate data
- Cross-school implementation

What limits it

- Limited funding
- Workforce capacity or skills
- Change fatigue
- Risk aversion
- Regulation & accountability
- Legacy practices and capabilities

There's an inherent tension between standardised practice across a trust and the individual autonomy of its schools and leaders. A central functions team can support innovation, but participants stressed the need to stay attentive to the differences between schools and the needs of each setting.

There also appears to be an emerging distinction between "innovation" and simply bringing trust business practices up to private-sector standards. Several participants questioned whether activities described as innovative within MATs would be seen as innovative in the private sector — suggesting that the meaning and ambition of "business innovation" in a trust context may itself be an important finding.

An Emerging Model

A preliminary model is starting to take shape from the data:

MAT STRUCTURAL CAPACITY

- Centralised functions
- Specialist expertise
- Scale & purchasing power
- Data & technology infrastructure
- Governance & leadership

creates the potential for

POTENTIAL

- Operational improvement
- Experimentation
- Standardisation
- Knowledge sharing
- Resource optimisation

mediated by

MEDIATING FACTORS

- Organisational culture
- Staff capability & buy-in
- Change capacity
- Funding
- Risk appetite
- Regulation & accountability

with innovation increasingly directed towards

DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

- Efficiency & operational excellence
- Better use of resources
- Improved staff capacity
- Educational outcomes
- Community / social value

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The full findings land at SAAS Birmingham 2026

Full findings from this research project will be published and released at the Schools & Academies Show Birmingham, 18–19 November, at the NEC — alongside 40+ hours of in-depth, best-practice and CPD-certified content.

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SAAShow — Schools & Academies Show Research Series

This is an interim summary. Full findings, methodology and analysis will follow ahead of SAAS Birmingham, 18–19 November 2026.