

The impact of post-2010 sponsored academies

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The logo for the London School of Economics (LSE), consisting of the letters 'LSE' in white, bold, sans-serif font on a red square background.

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The logo for the Education Policy Institute, featuring the text 'EDUCATION POLICY INSTITUTE' in white, sans-serif font on a teal square background. To the right of the text is a teal circle with a white segment on its left side.

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The policy context

The sponsored academy policy, introduced by the 1997 – 2010 Labour Government, continued under the Coalition (2010 – 2015) and then the Conservative Government of 2015 to the present.

The commencement of the Education and Adoption Act in April 2016 means that the number of sponsored academies is set to increase. The Act means that any school deemed by Ofsted to be ‘inadequate’ (meaning it has serious weaknesses or requires special measures) must be issued with an academy order. This represents a significant shift from the previous legislation which provided forced academisation as one of an range of options and often a last resort. The Act also gave the Secretary of State, working through the Regional Schools Commissioners, the power to intervene in ‘coasting schools’. While academisation is not the only option in these circumstances, this policy is likely to add to the number of sponsored academies over the coming years.

While the evidence published to date has focused on the sponsored academies pre-2010 (Eyles and Machin 2016) and the converter academies post-2010 (see Eyles et al 2016), this is the first rigorous analysis of the effect of the post-2010 sponsored academies.

The research has been carried out by Andrew Eyles, Gabriel Heller-Sahlgren, Stephen Machin, Matteo Sandi and Olmo Silva of the London School of Economics in partnership with the Education Policy Institute.

How the performance of pre-2010 sponsored academies is assessed

In this data analysis, we consider the performance of the 205 secondary academies that were approved to be sponsored after the May 2010 General Election and which opened by December 2014. These academies are then compared to a control group of 49 sponsored academies that opened **after** this period (44 that opened in 2015/16 and 5 that are set to open in 2016/17).

Five years prior to becoming an academy, the key stage 2 results of the treatment group is more than 30 per cent of a standard deviation below the national average and their GCSE results are around 3 grades below. The control group have slightly better prior attainment than the treatment group which is consistent with government policy to intervene in the most underperforming schools first. This is demonstrated in **Table 1**.

We do, however, have to control for any changes to pupil composition once a school becomes an academy. This is important because if a school becomes more or less attractive to parents (and therefore enrolls pupils of higher or lower ability), this can contaminate our results. To address this, the analysis considers only the attainment of pupils who were enrolled in the school **before** it became an academy. We refer to these as 'legacy enrolled' pupils.

The characteristics of sponsored academies

Table 1

	Standardised Key stage 4 points score	Standardised Key stage 2 points score	Proportion missing Key Stage 2	Proportion male	Proportion white	Proportion eligible for free school meals	Proportion special educational needs	Proportion native English speaker	Number of Schools
All Secondary Schools	0	0	0.073	0.506	0.828	0.132	0.17	0.895	2926
All Secondary Schools except 254 sample schools	0.03	0.022	0.072	0.504	0.825	0.128	0.167	0.893	2672
Treatment Academies	-0.313	-0.232	0.092	0.523	0.854	0.177	0.21	0.914	205
Control To Be Academies	-0.185	-0.178	0.063	0.535	0.878	0.164	0.19	0.926	49
Treatment – Control Difference	-0.128 (0.037)	-0.054(0.037)	0.029 (0.006)	-0.011 (0.014)	-0.024 (0.030)	0.014 (0.019)	0.020 (0.014)	-0.012 (0.024)	

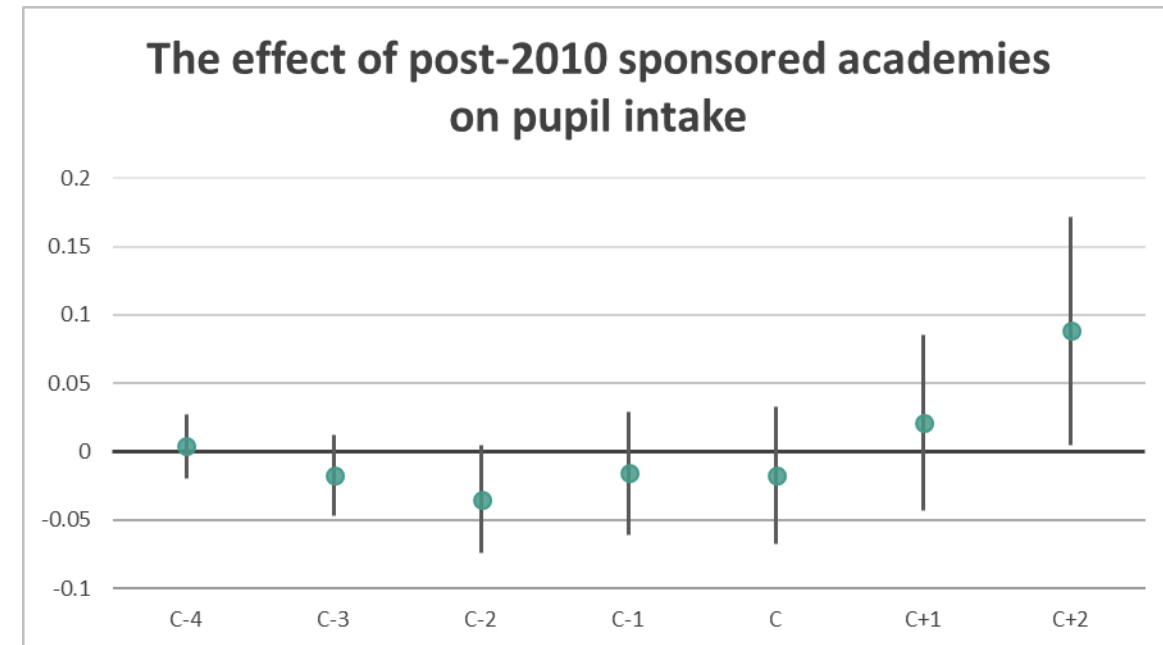
The data refers to characteristics in the 2005/06 school year.

The impact of post-2010 sponsored academies on pupil intake

As the previous table shows, the 205 post-2010 sponsored academies in our treatment group were still amongst the worst performing schools in the country.

Similar to the findings of the pre-2010 sponsored academies, the analysis finds that there is a shift in the prior attainment of pupils once a school becomes an academy. In this instance, the key stage 2 scores of pupils are almost nine per cent of a standard deviation better two years after the change to academy status (compared to the control group). In other words, the ability of the pupils attending the sponsored academy shifted from the bottom 43 per cent to the bottom 45 per cent. This is shown in the adjacent graph.

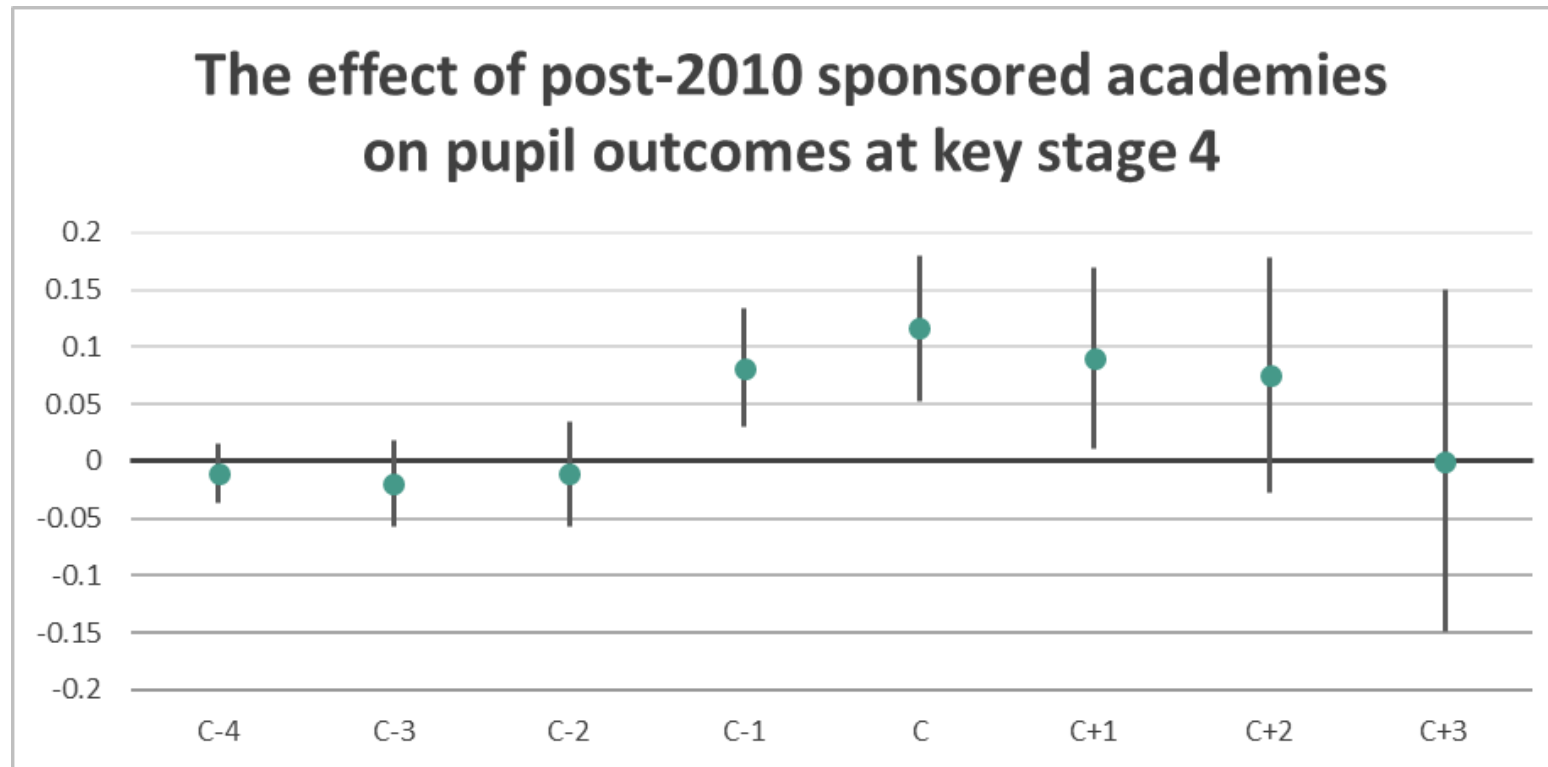
Figure 1



The impact of post-2010 sponsored academies on pupil outcomes

The graph below shows how the key stage 4 outcomes of post-2010 sponsored academies compare to the control group from four years prior to conversion to three years after conversion. C is the first year of key stage 4 results following conversion to academy status. These figures are adjusted to remove the impact of pupils with certain characteristics (that could correlate with achievement) choosing to enrol in an academy.

Figure 2



The changes in performance shown here are relative to performance 5 years prior to conversion, for both the control group and the treatment group

Schools tend to improve results a year before they become a sponsored academy

The first interesting point to note is that we see a sudden jump in key stage 4 results of pupils in the year immediately before conversion to academy status, **equivalent to 1.2 GCSE grades in one subject**.

While we cannot be certain about the specific causes of this sudden improvement, there are a number of factors which might explain it. The spike in results could suggest that, in these schools, there was an intensive and targeted focus on key stage 4 pupils in the year (perhaps years) immediately prior to becoming an academy. This could be driven by school leaders wanting to avoid becoming an academy by demonstrating improved results or perhaps wanting to become attractive to a successful chain.

Another explanation is that some of these schools, after years of poor performance, have taken action to raise standards under pressure from Ofsted and other bodies. This could include the appointment of a new head teacher or new teaching policies for example. These interventions may have then had a positive effect on results.

Therefore, while we find a distinct improvement in results in that pre-conversion year, we cannot attribute it to the academies policy without further research.

But we cannot yet tell whether that improvement is sustained

We then find that the average improvement in key stage 4 results rises again to 1.7 grades higher in one subject in the year in which a post-2010 sponsored academy converts. However, comparative improvement then starts to fall over the subsequent three years until it is back to zero (so no different to the control group) by the fourth year of becoming an academy.

However, it is difficult to discern how much of this 'fall' is due to a real decline in improvement or how much of it is a result of the control group improving its own results in the year before it becomes an academy (thereby replicating the C-1 spike in performance). Essentially, we find that the control group starts to behave differently as it prepares for academy conversion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while we find an initial (and significant) improvement in the year prior to and after becoming a sponsored academy, we cannot attribute that trend to anything that may have been implemented by the academy sponsor. It may however be a result of the incentives generated by the academisation policy, which the government may well argue is a success in itself. Or, it could be that these schools were improving in any case (perhaps as a result of competition pressures or other interventions), and the fact that they became academies is not relevant.

Neither can we say, yet, that the improvements are sustained over a period of longer than three years.

Further analysis is required to try and establish whether there is a direct impact of a school becoming a sponsored academy on attainment. The Education Policy Institute and the LSE will be exploring alternative econometric methods to try and answer this.