

## Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

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### **RESEARCH FEATURE: Learning from UK Multi-Academy Trusts: Insights from an ISQ Study Tour**

#### Foreword

Across Australia, schools are navigating a period of significant complexity and change. Expectations from families and communities continue to rise, student needs are becoming more diverse, and workforce pressures are reshaping how schools operate and how leaders lead. In this environment, the question facing education systems is not simply how to improve individual schools, but how to support improvement more reliably and sustainably across groups of schools.

Recent national discussion has increasingly focused on the concept of Multi-School Organisations (MSOs) as one possible response. The 2024 Grattan Institute report *Spreading Success: Why Australia should trial multi-school organisations* has helped bring this idea into sharper focus. The report suggests that more deliberate and structured collaboration between schools may help spread effective practice, strengthen leadership capacity and reduce the operational pressures that many principals currently carry alone.

International experience is also providing useful insight. In October 2025, Independent Schools Queensland led a study tour to the United Kingdom to examine the work of high-performing Multi-Academy Trusts. These organisations bring groups of schools together under shared leadership, governance and support structures. The tour provided an opportunity to observe how these models operate in practice, including curriculum design, professional learning, governance arrangements, data use and shared services.

This Briefing article draws together the evidence presented in the Grattan report with reflections from the

ISQ study tour. While the Australian context differs from that of the United Kingdom, the experiences of these trusts highlight both the opportunities and the considerations involved in organising schools to work more intentionally together.

For Queensland's independent sector, which is characterised by diversity, innovation and strong community connection, the emerging conversation around MSOs invites careful consideration of how collaboration, scale and shared expertise might further strengthen outcomes for students, staff and school communities.



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**RESEARCH FEATURE: Learning from UK Multi-Academy Trusts: Insights from an ISQ Study Tour**



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**Spreading success through Multi School Organisations: what the Grattan evidence and ISQ's UK study tour mean for our sector.**

Australian schools are operating in an era of sustained and intensifying pressure. Rising community expectations, increasingly complex student needs and a tightening education labour market are converging in ways that are reshaping the work of schooling and school leadership. While none of these challenges are entirely new, their cumulative impact is unprecedented. Principals are now expected to drive

continuous improvement in academic outcomes, prioritise student and staff wellbeing, navigate persistent workforce shortages, and respond to rapidly evolving community demand, all while sustaining the daily operational rhythm and culture of their schools. Teachers, in turn, are being asked to cater for greater diversity in learning needs, manage complex behaviours, and adapt to ongoing curriculum and assessment reform. Against this backdrop, the 2024 Grattan Institute report *Spreading Success: Why Australia should trial multi-school organisations*, authored by Jordana Hunter, Amy Haywood and Nick Parkinson, offers a timely and thought-provoking contribution to the national discussion about how school systems can better support leaders and spread effective practice at scale.

The report argues that while Australia has invested heavily in school autonomy, collaborative networks, and departmental support structures, these approaches on their own or in combination are no longer sufficient to address the scale or complexity of the challenges schools are facing. According to the report, the current system asks too much of individual schools and relies on models of improvement that are difficult to sustain, uneven in impact, and overly dependent on exceptional leaders working in relative isolation. It is within this context that the report introduces the idea of the Multi-School Organisation (MSO), not as a sudden overhaul or radical disruption, but as an evolution in how schools might work together more deliberately and more effectively.

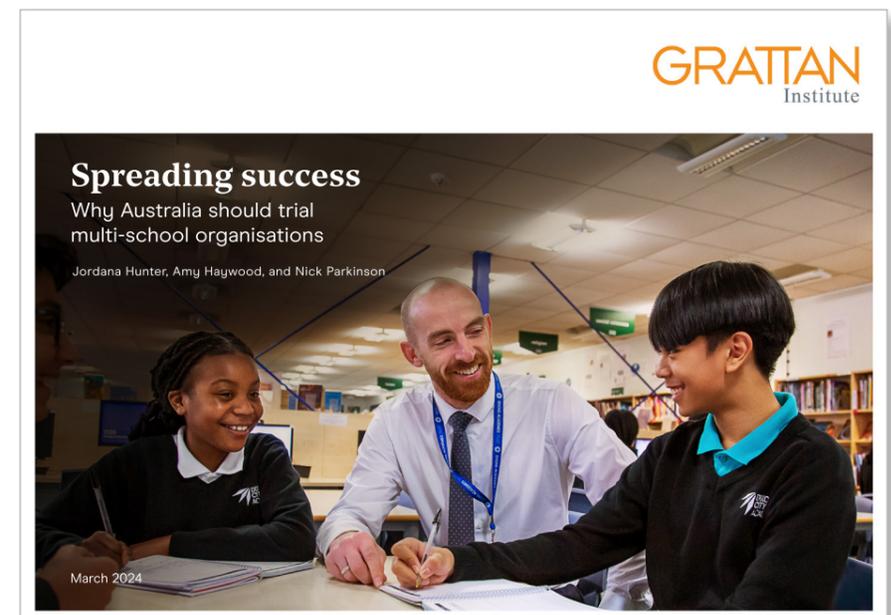
Before presenting the MSO as a solution, the report takes care to name the underlying problem: that scattered efforts, however well-intentioned, cannot reliably produce the consistent, system-wide improvement that Australian students deserve. Only once this landscape is clear does the report suggest the potential of MSOs as a more structured, coherent, and supportive way of organising schools for success. Prior to the release of the report, in 2023, about one in three Australian students fell short of the proficient benchmark in NAPLAN reading and numeracy, underscoring the need to re-examine current improvement approaches and the need for a structural alternative that reliably lifts the odds of improvement. In 2025, NAPLAN results have again shown roughly one-third of students are not meeting expectations (below the 'developing' standard) in literacy and numeracy. The results also show concerning trends with students in remote areas, Indigenous students, and those experiencing disadvantage, falling well behind their peers (Branley, 2025).

As conversations about how best to support schools continue to evolve, a new structural idea has begun to gain attention for its practicality and promise. Rather than asking each school to shoulder the full weight of improvement on its own or relying on loose, good-will networks, the MSO offers a more deliberate way of working together.

**What is an MSO?**

At its core, an MSO brings a group of schools into a formal, long-term partnership under a shared leadership team that stewards both vision and day-to-day improvement. This model allows schools to retain their individual identities while drawing on the collective strength, expertise and stability of a larger, unified organisation. Grattan's central claim is that MSOs are 'Goldilocks-sized' which is typically between ten and one hundred schools—so they are large enough to marshal specialist expertise and enact a coherent model, yet small enough to 'own' the day-to-day challenges that principals, staff, and students face on the ground. The international case studies presented in the Grattan report from England and New York City show that, when well designed, MSOs provide high-quality curriculum and assessment, targeted coaching and professional learning, and 'flood the zone' with expert help when a school is in crisis, which together makes improvement more likely and less dependent on heroic individuals (Hunter et al, 2024).

FIGURE 1: GATTON INSTITUTE REPORT. WWW.GRATTAN.EDU.AU



**ISQ UK Study Tour**

In October 2025, Independent Schools Queensland led a two-week international study tour to the United Kingdom, examining the governance, operations, and educational approaches of high-performing Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs).

The delegation was made up of system leaders from a range of schooling contexts including multi-campus large schools, Special Assistance Schools and faith-based schools. The MATs visited were all referenced in the Grattan report included:

- Edens Boy Leadership Academy Star Academies
- Dixon's Unity and Trinity Academies In Bradford and Leeds
- Nechells Primary E-Act Academy
- Oxford Diocesan Board of Education and The Marlborough Church of England Secondary School
- United Learning, Langford Primary Academy and Paddington Academy
- Twyford CofE High School
- Ark Academy.

The ISQ led tour offered Queensland delegates valuable insights into structural efficiencies, system

leadership, curriculum design, and strategies for improving student engagement and outcomes.

**A Shifting Policy Context**

UK schools, much like those in Australia, are navigating intensifying cost-of-living pressures, rising community expectations, and increased scrutiny of school performance. Delegates arrived amid anticipated education reforms, including a delayed School Education White Paper, an extensive curriculum and assessment review, and renewed focus on tackling child poverty. These significant national conversations underscored the complexity of delivering sustainable reform in a context of political volatility, heightened media attention, and increased demand for support for students with additional needs.

The Confederation of School Trusts (CST) Conference reinforced these themes, highlighting the shared challenges faced across nations: ensuring curriculum relevance, meeting escalating needs in disability and inclusion, balancing accountability frameworks, and strengthening pathways for post-school learning and work. The conference's unifying

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theme, *Flourish*, emphasised that educator wellbeing is foundational to student flourishing, a message that resonates strongly within Queensland's independent sector.

**Governance and Funding: System-Level Accountability**

Across all MATs visited, governance structures demonstrated a clear and intentional hierarchy designed to streamline operations and strengthen accountability. Trust Boards provided overarching strategic direction, supported by central executive teams responsible for finance, HR, curriculum, estates, and specialist services. Regional Principals or Executive Heads oversaw clusters of schools, allowing Head Teachers to focus heavily on teaching and learning.

A notable feature was the central pooling of all government funding, enabling redistribution based on school and student need. MATs reported significant variance in per-student funding across regions and relied heavily on Pupil Premium and SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disability) loadings to support students experiencing disadvantage. This centralised model allowed MATs to operate with consistency, equity, and economies of scale—insights especially relevant as more Queensland independent operators expand to multiple campuses.

**Accountability Through Ofsted**

The introduction of the updated Ofsted Education Inspection Framework created a palpable sense of uncertainty during the visit. While the new framework aimed to rebalance the relationship between schools and inspectorate, leaders expressed ongoing concern about its high-stakes nature. MATs shared both the burden and pride associated with these external ratings. Many had successfully transformed previously underperforming schools, leveraging improved ratings to build trust within communities and grow their networks.

**Curriculum, Pedagogy and the Centrality of Data**

Classroom observations revealed a strong and consistent emphasis on evidence-based teaching, direct instruction, and minimising cognitive load. Many MATs used centralised curriculum playbooks outlining lesson structure, pedagogical expectations, and assessment protocols. Teachers reported that these resources enhanced clarity, reduced variation, and supported higher-quality teaching across their schools.

Across all visits, strong routines were evident: daily lining-up procedures, structured entry into classrooms, and explicit teaching norms formed part of a trust-wide culture of 'disruption-free learning.' There was also a distinct approach to technology—students used pen and paper almost exclusively, with digital tools reserved for teacher modelling rather than student device use.

Data-informed practice was central to improvement cycles. Trusts aggregated assessment and operational data across multiple schools, enabling rapid identification of best practice, teacher effectiveness, and targeted intervention.

**Operations, Workforce, and Professional Learning**

Centralising non-teaching functions was one of the most significant themes observed. Trusts reported substantial financial savings and improved system quality through consolidating procurement; property and maintenance; HR and recruitment; ICT; health and safety; and school improvement support.

Workforce models also differed significantly from those in Queensland. Head Teachers were predominantly instructional leaders, with minimal involvement in operational or capital matters. Trusts offered accelerated career pathways, often attracting younger staff prepared to work in challenging contexts before later relocating for lifestyle reasons.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) is shifting toward apprenticeship-style pathways through the National Institute of Teaching or MAT-based programs, supporting rapid workforce development and attracting career changers. Professional learning was intensive and continuous, with daily coaching, structured induction, and trust-wide curriculum expertise supporting teacher growth.

**IMAGES (CLOCKWISE L-R): ISQ UK STUDY TOUR 2025. LOCATIONS SHOWN INCLUDE: OXFORD DIOCESAN BOARD OF EDUCATION, CHURCH HOUSE, OXFORD; NEHELLS PRIMARY ACADEMY; TWYFORD ACADEMY; THE CONFEDERATION OF SCHOOL TRUSTS CONFERENCE, BIRMINGHAM**



**Key Insights for Queensland Contexts**

Delegates recognised parallels with the local sector, particularly the value of centralising non-teaching functions, strengthening system coherence, and embedding consistent pedagogical approaches. The tour also prompted reflection on issues emerging both internationally and at home: persistent post-COVID attendance challenges, changing demographics of disadvantage, and the ongoing need to support student engagement in Year 9 and beyond.

Another significant outcome was the strengthened collegiality between Queensland school systems represented on the tour. Delegates expressed a desire to continue collaborating and sharing insights to improve outcomes for students and communities across the independent sector.

**2026 Trial of an Australian MSO in Tasmania**

As a point of immediate Australian relevance, Tasmania has already announced that it will trial the UK-inspired MSO model in government schools, beginning in Term 1, 2026, with New Town Primary, Moonah Primary and Risdon Vale Primary volunteering to form the state's first multi-school organisation under a shared executive leadership team. The Tasmanian Government has framed the five-year pilot as an adaptive, independently evaluated reform aimed at lifting literacy, numeracy and attainment while reducing administrative burden. The Education Minister has emphasised that the model will be "tweaked" to be purpose-fit for local conditions rather than simply imported. The government has also indicated that schools not in the pilot will still be grouped under dedicated executive

leadership from 2026 to ensure closer support for all schools. These developments are corroborated by the ABC's reporting of the announcement and by the Tasmanian Government's own media release and reform page, which together set out the trial's scope, timeline and rationale (DECYP, 2025).

Accountability remains the area where caution is warranted. The refreshed Ofsted Education Inspection Framework in England was intended to temper some of the perceived high-stakes dynamics of inspection, yet many trust leaders still feared an adversarial 'us versus them' climate and expressed the impact the inspection process can have on staff wellbeing. Grattan explicitly recommends that Australian MSO trials pair greater autonomy with rigorous but improvement-minded public evaluation, transparent impact reporting, and strong financial governance, thereby avoiding known pitfalls of rapid expansion or weak oversight.

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**Exploring a Possible Approach to a Multi-School Organisation Model**

**Beginning With a Beacon School**

One potential starting point for an MSO in the Queensland independent school context could be the establishment of a high performing ‘beacon school’ willing to open its classrooms, share expert staff and make its culture visible across the network. Such a school might provide a tangible example of routines, teaching practices and professional norms that other schools could draw from as the model develops.

**Supportive Leadership Structures**

Supervisory spans for Executive Principals could remain deliberately small, up to five schools to allow support to stay close to classrooms and attuned to each school’s context. This approach may help maintain a hands on, relationship based model of system leadership that strengthens day to day improvement work.

**Developing a Light, Coherent Backbone**

A shared ‘backbone’ could be introduced early to offer clarity without constraining the character of individual schools. This might include agreed curriculum maps, assessment windows in English and mathematics, behaviour expectations, coaching rhythms and a

small number of data collection points. Schools could then adapt how these elements are enacted to honour their distinct community identities.

**Building Trust Through Lean Central Services**

Central services may begin in a lean, agile form, focused on responsiveness and value for schools. Early indicators of success could include how effectively central teams reduce administrative load, improve clarity and respond to school needs. In many systems, principal confidence in the centre has been a critical foundation for sustainable growth, the phrasing ‘let the system take the strain’ was often referred to over the course of the study tour.

**Embedding Inclusion from the Outset**

Inclusion could be intentionally engineered into the model from the beginning. Shared screening tools, consistent classroom adjustments and common case management processes may help ensure that students with additional needs receive comparable support across sites. Approaches like Star Academies’ *All Stars Succeed* show how high expectations for curriculum access can sit alongside practical differentiation that is visible in everyday teaching. Shared assessment windows, paired with moderation, data days and rapid reteaching cycles, can also help teachers make responsive adjustments with confidence.

**A REALISTIC, STAGED ROLLOUT**

A 12 to 18 month pathway might offer schools the space needed to build a thoughtful MSO.

**FORMATION (MONTHS 1–6)**

Nearby, like minded schools could come together around a shared mission, nominate a beacon school and publish a first version of the backbone for English, mathematics, behaviour and coaching.

**STAND UP (MONTHS 6–12)**

A small central team—covering people and culture, finance and compliance, curriculum and assessment, data and analytics—could launch induction processes, provide shared planning materials and pacing guides, and establish consistent coaching routines.

**PROVE AND EXPAND (MONTHS 12–18)**

Two assessment windows with cross school moderation could lead to a public ‘Impact Pack’ highlighting progress, attendance, attainment and value add indicators. Any expansion in membership might depend on the central team’s demonstrated capacity to support additional schools to standard.

**Adapting Insights for the Queensland Context**

While UK examples offer helpful insights, Queensland’s legal, cultural and curriculum environment will shape how such features translate locally. QCAA requirements, for instance, will influence curriculum and assessment design. Attendance outreach and

*The key learnings from the UK Study Tour have influenced and shaped our thinking in the following areas:*

- **One brand and vision:** Continue the work on our one brand project to establish clear consistent purpose across our schools.
- **Planning:** Prepare a five-year roadmap to establish a clear operating framework within our organisation, investing in consistent business systems, embedding policies and procedures across schools that prioritise the achievement of purpose.
- **Teaching and Learning:** review our teaching framework across our schools. Establish a framework to lead, challenge and endorse curriculum decisions and seek to establish broad consistency across our schools on our teaching and learning model.
- **Curriculum:** progressively invest in comprehensive and shared learning resources, consistent with the teaching and learning framework, across our schools that supports teachers in quality learning and assessment. Establish a systemic collegial approach to endorsing and implementing their use.
- **Teacher Capability Framework:** establish a teacher capability framework utilising the AITSL standards, that is matched to the teaching and learning model and teaching and learning framework, that supports the teaching and learning frameworks and new shared learning resources.
- **Wellbeing:** an evidence-based wellbeing framework for the group be investigated and developed.

- **Data:** build a high-quality business intelligence infrastructure to support decision-making, reporting and shared services accountability.
- **Attendance:** a stronger focus on student (and Staff) attendance, working with families to underscore the critical importance of attendance on student literacy and numeracy outcomes .

AARON DEVINE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, OHANA FOR YOUTH

*The study tour has already influenced our direction of school improvement. We are:*

- developing a system-wide teaching and learning playbook, grounded in cognitive science and shared routines
- redesigning leadership pathways to strengthen pipeline processes, succession and reduce reliance on individual resilience
- exploring and improving our shared services approaches to school resources and improving inclusion, early screening, and access to specialist expertise
- recalibrating governance conversations toward culture, talent, and sustainability
- engaging more deliberately with Prac teachers and teacher training to advocate for evidence-informed pedagogy.

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technology use may require careful calibration to reflect local expectations and family partnerships. Governance arrangements could retain a strong community voice while enabling MSO level strategic coherence.

Similarly, any assurance or review processes could be designed to prioritise improvement, transparency and public trust, rather than replicating high stakes inspection cultures from elsewhere. Clear reporting—audited accounts, impact summaries and value add measures—may help build shared confidence among families, staff and boards.

**The Emerging Case for an MSO**

Across the Grattan evidence base, the ISQ study tour and Tasmania’s early trial, a consistent message emerges: a thoughtfully designed MSO could help independent schools retain their identity while benefiting from shared access to specialist expertise, deeper professional learning, stronger curriculum assurance, better data practices and reduced administrative burden. The structure alone cannot guarantee improvement, however, it may increase the likelihood of stronger

culture, more consistent teaching and more equitable outcomes.

As the Grattan Institute notes, “schools need a lot more support to provide an excellent education for all,” and MSOs may offer one way of organising that support more coherently.

The opportunity for Queensland’s independent sector may lie not only in collaborating, but in doing so with enough clarity, coherence and care to build on the strengths of the sector but also spread and share the success more broadly.

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