

**COASTAL ACADEMIES:
CHANGING SCHOOL
CULTURES IN
DISADVANTAGED
COASTAL REGIONS IN
ENGLAND**



**Dr Tanya Ovenden-Hope
Dr Rowena Passy**

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	5
Section1: Introduction	6
Section2: Research methods	9
Section 3: Putting coastal academies in context	12
3.1 Local context	12
3.1.1 Educational isolation.....	12
3.1.2 Recruitment	13
3.1.3 Engaging students and their families with education.....	14
3.1.4 Failing local primaries	15
3.1.5. Local politics.....	15
3.2 Institutional issues	16
3.2.1 Teaching quality	16
3.2.2 Student behaviour	17
3.3 Policy direction.....	18
3.4 Key points.....	20
Section 4: Changing cultures.....	21
4.1 Vision and values	21
4.2 Early measures	23
4.2.1 Engaging students with learning at school	23
4.2.2 Raising the quality of teaching and learning.....	24
4.2.3 Capacity building.....	27
4.2.4 Sponsor support.....	28
Key points.....	28
Section 5: New challenges	29
5.1 Student behaviour	29
5.2 Staffing issues and teaching aspirations	31
5.3 Working with the community	33
5.4 Key points.....	34
Section 6: Conclusion	35
6.1 Special and common features.....	35
6.2 Successes.....	35
6.3 Key challenges.....	36
6.4 Changing culture	37

References 39

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to those six academies who hosted our research with such generosity, both in terms of their time and their contribution to the study.

We are equally grateful to Plymouth University, the Academies Enterprise Trust and The Cornwall College Group, whose support enabled the research to take place.

Section1: Introduction

The increase in the number and type of academies, together with the development of academy chains, is arguably the most significant recent development in educational policy in England. The programme's origins lie in the City Technology Colleges (CTCs), introduced from 1987 as a response to concerns that secondary education was failing in its task to provide a trained workforce. Unlike other state-maintained schools, CTCs were independent of local authority (LA) supervision, were owned by not-for-profit bodies which were expected to contribute substantial sums towards costs, and had a contractual agreement with the government to deliver education. This funding structure was:

... a significant movement away from local authority control of schools, with more emphasis placed on autonomy, thus representing a key point of departure from previous policies (West and Bailey, 2013, p.141).

The idea of CTCs proved difficult to implement, however, and few sponsors were attracted to the programme. But by 2000 the then Labour government had returned to the idea of CTCs in the form of city academies, this time to tackle persistent underperformance in the most challenging urban secondary school settings (Chapman, 2013). Autonomy from local authorities was seen in this case as providing the freedom to generate the kind of entrepreneurial leadership that was more usually associated with private sector business, and that this would lead to substantial improvement in educational standards in those areas (Woods et al, 2007).

Subsequently, the Coalition government has expanded the programme as a solution to raising educational standards in primary and secondary schools across the system, with the result that the Academies Commission describes four types of academy currently in existence:

- Sponsored
 - Converter
 - Enforced sponsor
 - Free schools
- (Pearson/RSA, 2013).

Rising from a total of 203 academies in 2010, there are now 2,109 secondary academies, and 2,569 primary academies (DfE, 2015). Academies can operate as a stand-alone school (or single academy trust) or become part of an academy chain of under the control of a Strategic Management Executive (or multiple academy trust); in November 2012 there were 312 academy chains, and 39 per cent of academies belonged to a chain (Pearson/RSA, 2013, p.17).

Despite the increase in numbers, academies remain highly controversial. For those on the right of the political spectrum, academies are seen as a means to increase choice within the

education system by promoting innovation and injecting new freedoms, energy and ideas (Chapman, 2013), while for those on the left, academies are regarded as a form of privatisation of the education service that will lead to greater social segregation (Machin and Vernoit, 2011). Other issues relate to potential conflicts of interest within academy trusts, trusts that are getting into financial difficulties (Greany and Scott, 2014) and the debate on Ofsted's potential role in inspecting the management of academy chains in the same way as it inspects local authorities (e.g. BBC news, January 2015). In addition, and despite some 'impressive results' in turning round the examination performance of some academies in particularly challenging circumstances (Chapman, 2013, p.336), the overall impact of academies has been difficult to assess (e.g. DfE, 2012; Machin and Venoit, 2011), partly because of frequent changes to the programme during its existence.

These controversies make research into the challenges that academies face and the way that their leaders respond particularly important; as a central plank of government policy, it is critical that we understand the leadership and management of these independent, autonomous schools. This is particularly the case for coastal academies, which have a range of issues similar to those of inner-city schools, but have been relatively neglected in terms of policy strategy and research. We define 'coastal academies' as first phase academies (state secondary schools converted to academy status due to poor student performance) located in seaside towns/cities (coastal regions) in England.

There are signs, however, that the Coalition government began to recognise the extent of poverty in coastal regions:

Many seaside towns and villages have suffered decades of economic decline. Many young people, for example, have moved away from coastal areas due to a lack of job opportunities. We need to invest in coastal towns to help their economies grow and reduce unemployment and deprivation

(Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012).

Recently Ofsted (Ofsted, 2013; see also Weale, 2014) have also identified a link between student performance and 'deprived coastal towns', with a realisation that these areas have 'felt little impact from national initiatives designed to drive up the standards for the poorest children' (Ofsted, 2013). Our project aims to highlight the educational challenges faced by academies in socio-economically deprived coastal regions and thereby contribute to filling the research gap in this area.

The structure of the report is as follows. In Section 2, we outline the research methods for this study and describe the participating academies. In Section 3 we place these coastal academies in context, highlighting the particular challenges that they face. Section 4 is concerned with the early measures taken by academy leaders in stabilising the failing

predecessor schools, and Section 5 considers the steps leaders are taking to move towards an 'Outstanding' Ofsted categorisation. In Section 6, we bring the report to a conclusion.

Section 2: Research methods

This report provides findings from the third phase of our work in understanding the challenges faced by coastal academies, building on a project that began in 2010 as a longitudinal study involving the conversion of one national challenge school to academy status¹. The 'Class of 2010' project is following the first cohort of Year 7 students' progress through their secondary education up to the age of 18, and consists of annual interviews with school leaders, teaching staff and pupils; pupil data examination; and examination of academy documents. The whole aims to monitor and evaluate changes undertaken in the academy through this time.

The study was expanded in 2011 to include comparison of the strategies, processes and outcomes of two further coastal academies². In 2013 we received funding to include three more academies, bringing the total for this third phase of the research to six. The objectives of the project in this year, as in 2011, were to:

- study each academy's publicly-available data to provide context for the research
- examine relevant documentation provided by each academy e.g. Academy Improvement Plan, Academy Organisational Structure.
- interview the principal (or delegated representative) of each establishment to understand the context of the academy, the strategic priorities, challenges and successes
- interview a sample of four teachers. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a range of different views on the impact of the measures undertaken thus far.

Data collection was completed in the summer term of 2014, and they have now been analysed thematically to examine commonalities and differences in leadership approach to the challenges faced on appointment. As the project focuses on schools that had been academies for a minimum of three years, the range of analysis has expanded to include the ongoing issues in consolidating early improvement.

In what follows, and in order to protect the identity of the academies who joined the research in 2013/14, we refer to participating schools as Academy 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. All were located in coastal regions. Academies 1, 2, 3 and 4 were located in the South of England, and 5 and 6 are in the North of England. Five of these academies were national challenge schools that converted to sponsored academy status before the Coalition government was elected in 2010; one converted in 2011 to becoming a sponsored academy as part of a local educational restructure. Academies 2 and 3 were part of a multi-academy trust, and the

¹ Class of 2010 – an investigation of the transition of a school with national challenge status into an Academy, evaluating the impact of the change for the students, staff and school between the years 2010 – 2017. The Class of 2010 study will continue alongside any further comparative investigations.

² Ovenden-Hope, T and Passy, R. (2013) Coastal Academies: Meeting the Challenge of School Improvement. Plymouth, Plymouth University.

remaining four were single academy trusts with a variety of educational and non-educational sponsors. At the time of interview in 2014, two interim principals had been recently appointed to established academies that were in special measures (academies 2 and 6), three had been part of the leadership team since conversion and had recently been appointed as principal (academies 1, 3 and 4) and one had remained as principal with the academy since its conversion from a national challenge school (academy 5). Two were large academies, two of average size and two were smaller than average. This information is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Characteristics of participating academies

Academy	Location	Academy trust	Size	Principal	Features	Sponsors
1	South	Single	A	New appointment	Culture of little expectation of students Low levels of student prior attainment Austerity increasing strain on families	Two education-sector and local council
2	South	Multiple	L	Interim	Merger of four schools Ofsted 'special measures'	Large Multi-Academy Trust (educational business)
3	South	Multiple	L	New appointment	Merger of two failing schools Failing primaries High level of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities	Large Multi-Academy Trust (educational business)
4	South	Single	S	New appointment	High proportion of looked after children Low levels of student prior attainment	One education-sector, local council and one business
5	North	Single	S	Long-standing	High levels of pupil deprivation High levels of pupils with SEN	One business and local council
6	North	Single	A	Interim	High levels of pupil deprivation High levels of	Three education-sector

					pupils with SEN	
--	--	--	--	--	-----------------	--

All six academies had at least met (and most exceeded) the 2012/13 DfE floor standard of 40 per cent of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C (or equivalent) including English and mathematics. However, following the implementation of new performance measures for the academic year 2013/14 (in which no vocational qualification could count for more than one GCSE and in which a maximum of two vocational qualifications were counted), four of the six met or exceeded the floor performance standard. This apparent drop in performance may be understood by recognising the academies' focus on vocational qualifications and on the importance of employability outcomes for learners.

One principal (academy 6) left shortly after our interviews were conducted. Interviewed staff reported that they lacked confidence in the academy leadership, and that they were finding the demands placed upon them to be difficult to manage. As much of this report focuses on the positive measures that leaders were taking to improve academy performance, we need to acknowledge that there were findings demonstrating poor leadership that were having a negative impact on staff morale. This academy, however, reached the floor standard of performance for 2013/4.

All academies had high numbers of pupils eligible for pupil premium and high or medium-to-high levels of pupils with SEN and/or disabilities; all were largely monocultural, with very low numbers of students who have English as an additional language (EAL). When we visited these academies in 2014, the latest Ofsted inspections categorised three as 'good', one as 'requires improvement' (although that judgement was upgraded to 'good' shortly after our visit) and two as in special measures.

This section provides an overview of the research methods used for all the studies undertaken on coastal academies that have contributed to this report. It also includes information on the location, size, trust and sponsor(s) of each of the six academies involved in the latest study.

To avoid the confusion of the different terms used in these academies, throughout this document we refer to school staff as Principals, Senior and Middle Leaders, and Teachers.

Section 3: Putting coastal academies in context

This section provides the context for the coastal academies that participated in this study. Drawing on the latest round of research interviews in 2014 for quotations, we bring together the evidence from all the research studies so far to show the challenges that Principals and their senior leaders from all six academies have faced – to a greater or lesser degree – in the course of turning failing schools around. The challenges are grouped together under the three different headings of local context, institutional issues and policy direction.

3.1 Local context

All six participating academies were located in areas with high levels of poverty and deprivation, and in which there were limited employment prospects for local school leavers; interviewees reported that local jobs tended to be seasonal and/or minimum wage, and that there were few manufacturing or professional opportunities. Local communities were also reported as having multi-generational low or unemployment, with poor experiences of education that had developed in places into an ‘anti-education’ culture, as education was perceived to have little positive impact on their own life chances. While these might mirror the conditions surrounding inner-city schools, the isolated location of these coastal academies brought additional challenges, described below.

3.1.1 Educational isolation

Principals interviewed reported on what one interviewee termed ‘*the infrastructural challenges to cohesive working*’ towards school improvement. In three cases, these challenges included being located in areas that had no neighbouring university:

So in big cities and big conurbations ... quite often you have some pretty high level universities or university people who engage directly with the difficulties and the challenges of urban schooling ... The universities have an interest ... and they also have a sense of mission as well because they see it as, 'Okay we're a university but we're located in a particular place and we want children from the local area to attend our university and we can help the school system as well' (Principal, academy 6).

Similarly, there had been no local school improvement measures in coastal regions that were comparable to, for example, the London or City Challenges. As one Principal commented:

Some of the initiatives which I've been used to in city areas weren't immediately apparent here. And so the really strong, sharply-focused school improvement initiatives which were spawned out of first National Strategies and then the City Challenges, they were conspicuous in their absence (Principal, academy 2).

The third, related, issue was the inward-looking nature of much school improvement, historically connected in some cases to a poorly-performing local authority that had provided little ongoing support for failing schools, or to the absence of high-performing schools in the area (see also Hargreaves, 2014, p.708):

... what you don't get is a lot of refresh. So in big cities and conurbations, you get movement in and out ... [Here, schools] tend to look inwards for their solutions and for school improvement. I think that's a massive risk [in an area of low-performing schools] (Principal, academy 6).

There is no Outstanding secondary school, whereas if you went to a metropolitan area we would see the Outstanding secondary schools. They've been loaded, they've had designations such as National Support Schools, the National Leaders of Education and they, in many instances, are the local hubs in school improvement (Principal, academy 2).

3.1.2 Recruitment

All academy leaders reported particular, and ongoing, difficulties with recruitment; although two felt that they were now able to attract higher-calibre candidates due to their improved local reputation. Interviewees commented that difficulties with recruitment related to the geographical isolation of these coastal academies and the limited employment prospects in coastal areas; experienced teachers often have families, and are reluctant to move to areas in which there would be difficulty in finding appropriate employment for their partners. On the other hand younger teachers, who are less likely to be in a stable relationship and/or have children, often want to be in an area that offers a wider range of social opportunities. The alternative, of travelling long distances to work, was equally reported as a significant barrier to recruitment. One Principal summed the situation up as:

... our location ... is rural and coastal, so you've got a limited pool of people to pull from (Principal, academy 4).

Interviewees reported that it can therefore be difficult to recruit staff for all areas of the curriculum, rather than just in the recruitment of the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subject teachers that is a current national issue:

We're actually finding that now it's not only the STEM subjects but it's the other subjects across the board that we're finding difficulty in recruiting. ... I need, desperately need a Learning Director for English because my current one is going to be retiring at the end of the year; I've advertised twice now and I've got not a single bite (Principal, academy 3).

I need a Head of English, but I wouldn't hold my breath in terms of response to a national advert in the Times Ed. I find myself trying to appoint from a field of one or two which is not ideal (Principal, academy 2).

3.1.3 Engaging students and their families with education

Five academies reported ongoing difficulties with engaging both students and their parents with the education offered by the academy. Some saw this as linked to the significant challenges associated with the long-term poverty and deprivation evident in the locality:

I used to have a guinea pig that the students could take home. Some students didn't have cars so I would drop them off at their houses ... Sometimes I actually worried about the guinea pig in the houses that I left them in. And you just think, gosh, they live that life day in, day out, and that's a person. So yeah, the students do have very difficult lives around here (Senior leader, academy 6).

Another, highly experienced, Principal commented:

I think it's just the area really. They [students] are challenging ... very low ambition, no aspirations some of them ... there's a lot of child protection and safeguarding issues. We run between 150-200 children on the child protection safeguarding register at any one time ... [there are] groups of self-harming so it's a big issue. Bullying ... They really, really struggle with social relationships. It's very different from the previous school I ran which was in a poorer area (Principal, academy 5).

In three academies, a significant number of parents had attended the predecessor failing schools and were reluctant to engage with an institution that they believed had offered them very little in the past. However five academies reported on the difficulties of encouraging parents to take an active role in supporting their children's education:

Forget everything else; that is our biggest challenge - to get the parents actually actively engaged and genuinely interested in their child's education. (Senior leader, academy 3).

Sometimes I think the parents are actually working against us. It feels like it sometimes, they're kind of undoing everything we've done here and it's just constantly uphill (Teacher, academy 1).

Several teachers expressed frustration with the lack of progress in this area, illustrated by the comment below:

I'm very, very frustrated ... in terms of our part of what we are doing I genuinely and honestly mean I don't think there's anything more we could do ... it seems to be a trait that they're actually genetically born with, not too fussed about education (Teacher, academy 3)

These factors, when combined with local employment conditions which one Principal described as having ‘*virtually no local future, or job prospects for these kids*’, can lead to a situation where a significant proportion of students fail to see the ‘point’ of education. One senior leader described the circumstances within his locality:

I mean I've thought about it with the seaside thing ... It's the redundancies in the 80s and early 90s where a huge amount of males were made redundant ... Now we're teaching ... probably the second generation of kids that have gone through a whole life [without seeing their parents employed] ... I think that's got a lot to do with it. They just, they don't see, they don't connect school with employment ... I would say on the whole, the vast majority of the boys just don't see a future between what they're doing in this place and what's going to be happening in 18 months' time [when they leave] (Senior leader, academy 6).

3.1.4 Failing local primaries

Although this was less of a problem than in the previous round of research, interviewees from three academies reported low or variable standards in their local primary feeder schools:

The primary schools are not flourishing under the Ofsted criteria ... We have a couple of primary schools who really struggle to recruit any teachers and when they do, they don't stay for very long, so retention is a real issue (Principal, academy 4).

... our primary schools are still in special measures. Okay they're gradually coming out, but then when one goes out the other one goes back in (Principal, academy 3).

Low-performing feeder primary schools relate to low levels of student prior attainment on entry to their academy, and can help to foster a culture of low expectations among staff. We return to this challenge in Section 3.2.

3.1.5. Local politics

The final point mentioned during interviews was the complexities of local politics when schools were converting to academy status. These included strong anti-academy local

sentiment; trade union opposition to academies; the logistical, financial and staffing difficulties associated with amalgamating schools into one (possibly unpopular) academy; and the inability to secure access to the new academy building until a short time before the opening term began. The one Principal interviewee who was in post for this process remembered it as '*a difficult, difficult time*', while a senior leader from another academy described the atmosphere at the time:

... we'd have the children who'd be protesting, jumping on the bandwagon, refusing to go into lessons and sitting on the verge. And, you know, we'd have parents coming out giving leaflets at the end of the school day and it was very difficult. Then you also had a lot of staff who hadn't secured jobs and they were crying openly in front of students (Senior leader, academy 6).

3.2 Institutional issues

Within the academies, the main challenges were the quality of teaching and student behaviour, described below.

3.2.1 Teaching quality

Principals and their staff spoke of initial issues with the quality of teaching that they believed stemmed from a combination of factors. Poor quality – or absence of – continuing professional development (CPD) in the predecessor schools; absence of clear teacher accountability; high rates of long-term staff sickness; poor student assessment structures; poor data management; incompetent staff in key positions; and poor staff morale all impacted upon student behaviour and contributed to failing schools. One Principal described the situation upon appointment:

... the biggest issues were the educational issues. You know, you pick up a Year 11 book. Where's the coursework? There wasn't any English coursework. The grades were, you know; I remember spending probably October putting Year 11 into the sports hall and giving them Maths test papers and working out an A-C grade which was something like 5%. It was incredible, absolutely incredible. And we realised then that we had some journey to go on. It was just unbelievable (Principal, academy 5).

All participating academies reported that the levels of student attainment on entry to Year 7 were below the national average, and all reported that the resulting low teacher expectations, for students, together with institutional structures that perpetuated such expectations, had been an issue. Echoing interviews from earlier in the research, one Principal pointed out the danger of low ambition in the longer-term:

... attainment at entry ... was perceived as being dramatically less than national and so some very supportive nurturing courses were put in place which has made it difficult for youngsters then to move from such courses into our robust Key Stage 4 curriculum (Principal, academy 2).

All academy leaders emphasised the need for high-quality teachers to ensure that students were able to attain the necessary levels of examination performance, regardless of prior performance. However the current demographic situation of falling student numbers, which was having the effect of reducing academy budgets and (in some cases) triggering staff reductions, when combined with the need to raise the standard of teaching among existing staff and the difficulty of recruitment (see previous section), was reported as adding complexity to an already difficult process. One senior leader illustrated the point:

We can only afford so many teachers, although we would happily appoint another English teacher. There isn't anyone to appoint and there's sort of the mixed thing of unqualified, not got a background in it versus make do and mend until we can get someone who is (Senior Leader, Academy 2).

3.2.2 Student behaviour

Student behaviour was regarded as a significant challenge at some point in five academies, linked to the issues described above of engaging students with education, poor quality teaching and the absence of order within the school. A senior leader offered a snapshot of student behaviour in the predecessor school:

The management had got to the stage where they had so many smashed windows, they weren't replacing them with glass, they were Perspex which then becomes scratched and grainy and ... you know, sort of opaque. Horrific. And the kids had sussed that so were, you know, ever inventive. They put stickers on the windows that they knew were glass so at the weekends they could smash the glass ones because the Perspex ones didn't break with stones. One weekend they had tens of windows smashed ... It was chaos, it was chaos. No teaching going on (Senior leader, academy 5).

While this was an extreme example, it illustrates both the extent to which disruptive behaviour can become a significant part of school culture and the nature of the task in turning around a highly challenging school. Linked to behaviour was the issue of attendance, which was an early difficulty for five academies but had since (generally) been overcome.

3.3 Policy direction

Although this was not part of the research interview schedule, all Principals referred at some point to the challenges associated with the educational policy environment of rapid and sustained change. One Principal commented on the provisional nature of academy leadership, particularly in the time close to a general election:

I can't presume that ... leadership needs or leadership demands in twelve months' time will be the same as they are in 2014. Any changes in Secretary of State, you can't tell what knock on effect that is going to have (Principal, academy 2).

One principal saw the change to the new performance measure Progress 8 as positive, although was not convinced that it would necessarily be implemented as planned:

As far the performance measures change, I think it will be really, really positive if they are as they appear they're going to be – and there is a bit of a 'but' there ... It'll be nice for this school not to be worrying about hitting floor measures when, you know ... actually being 5-10% above floor is fantastic in context. It doesn't look great nationally but it is actually a real achievement, and so being able to be judged in a fairer way with that being taken into account [is helpful] (Principal, academy 4).

Another, however, commented on the potentially negative impact of the move towards the more academic subjects of the English Baccalaureate while drawing attention to the provisional nature of policy announcements:

Yeah that [Progress 8] is something we put into place for creating the curriculum at the moment ... But we are not going to be able, and I will not force a single child to have to do a language that is not to their benefit, okay? I will ... [make] sure they have a strong package of guidance so that they can choose, so that they will get the eight, and they will get the E-Bacc 8 in there as well, if that's where we feel that the right place for them to go is. But I'm not going to be completely beholden to a government agenda which may change before it happens (Principal, academy 3).

Others saw the changes away from early examination entry, modular courses and reducing the number of vocational qualifications as unhelpful, both in terms of demotivating students in areas with historically low achievement levels, and in terms of leaving these academies vulnerable to lower examination performance results:

... the one thing is we cannot afford, this academy, for our students in two years' time [is] to have 8 GCSEs that they will take their exam only.

It will demoralise them. It will mean they don't achieve, you know, the sort of same standards as other people in the rest of the country and it's just the wrong thing for them. And I think it's probably wrong for most of the students in the country unless you happen to be from an academic family (Principal, academy 3).

... the change of the exam regime moving towards terminal assessment is not particularly helpful towards students in our profile (Principal, academy 2).

... we've lost all of the strategies that we had like the early entry, the modular stuff, you know we've lost all of that because Gove's taken it all away. We're in a bit more of a vulnerable position ... We never used [early entry] as 'Oh, you've got a C, you're all right'. That was never the mentality in here. The kids ... [achieved a] C, then they wanted a B, they were hungry for it because of the ethos that we've created. So what Mr Gove's done is taken away the real motivating factor for us, which I think is despicable (Principal, academy 5).

Mr Gove's taken away those great [vocational] qualifications for many of our children, which is really annoying... we could take a hit this year [with examination results], which would affect a potential Ofsted because it's all student-outcome based (Principal, academy 5).

These difficulties were compounded in one Principal's view by the instability of both the inspection and the examination grading systems:

Things that are easily measured [such as attendance], you can control but things like what are you going to get for English and Maths [you can't]. Well, the system is so unstable, the grade point boundaries are so unstable. Politicians fool around with the results. What was regarded as good performance is no longer (Principal, academy 6).

Finally, three principals remarked on the difficulty of a challenging coastal academy becoming a school rated as 'Outstanding' by Ofsted, with the quotation below illustrating the point:

In terms of this school, we'd like to be Outstanding ... That's become very difficult for us as Ofsted rack the standards up. I think it's unfair because I think in challenging schools it gets to be much more difficult to do it ... But, having said that, I don't use that as an excuse. I just think we just have to rise above that and we're going for it (Principal, academy 5).

3.4 Key points

In summary, the challenges reported by the educational leaders in these coastal academies included educational isolation; difficulties with staff recruitment; falling student numbers, which was squeezing budgets; failing local primaries; engaging students and their families with education; student behaviour; the quality of teaching and learning within the school; and the shifting priorities of educational policy. Some had experienced initial problems with local politics during the process of conversion to academy status, but these issues had subsequently settled down.

Section 4: Changing cultures

This section focuses on measures taken by these academy principals and senior leaders to improve examination performance in these failing schools, outlining the immediate changes that new principals put into action in the early stages of their appointment. We start the section, however, with a brief discussion of the notions of culture and vision.

4.1 Vision and values

The focus for all Principals on appointment to failing schools was to change the culture of low aspirations into one of engaging students with their learning, fostering high expectations for both teachers and students and achieving higher levels of attainment. We use the term 'culture' to describe:

the integration of environmental, organisational and experiential features of school existence to offer a context for teaching and learning, and its subsequent improvement (Glover and Coleman, 2005, p.266).

A point often raised at this juncture is the one of 'vision'; school leaders' notion of the educational, social and moral purpose of the service they are providing. The idea of vision has arguably become increasingly important as the range of leadership responsibilities has widened over recent years, and it is currently seen as an important element of leadership that brings staff and students together to enable the sense of joint purpose that facilitates institutional culture change:

Successful leaders develop a vision for their schools based on their personal and professional values. They articulate this vision at every opportunity and influence their staff and other stakeholders to share the vision. The philosophy, structures and activities of the school are geared towards the achievement of this shared vision (Bush and Glover, 2014, p.554).

And so it was with five of the Principals involved in our study, with three examples cited below:

The vision was really around high expectations, the kids come first, they come first always, every time, but the staff have to be well looked after and trained as well. But that we were setting a standard and that we weren't going to move from that standard. So you could either get on this ship or I would help you to get off it if you needed to go... And we set out a vision of really high expectations, changing the ethos, changing the culture and it was all around a set of core values ... order, discipline, care (Principal, academy 5).

I think a good head teacher needs a very clear moral purpose. They need to be convinced that what they do changes the lives of people and I think if people have that moral purpose, the job becomes an exciting challenge ... When I met the staff for the first time, I talked about my passion, I talked about my experience, my family experience, and I used the words: it's the decisions we make and the actions we take that can change the course of people's lives. I use that repeatedly and people buy into that and can see that. They can see it's about children, it's about individual fortunes. It's not about them, the teachers. It's about what the students need (Principal, academy 2).

I feel that the Academy now is at a stage where we need to probably revisit our purpose, our core purpose as an institution. So we've gone back and we've done a whole staff values exercise, feeding back on that values exercise on Friday to the whole of the staff. So you can really move forward with a purpose that everybody can reference to and that we can hold there. So everybody, from whatever level you are within the Academy, they can have an association with that (Principal, academy 1).

In the sixth academy, however, staff reported that this sense of leadership was missing, and that this was having a detrimental effect on staff morale and sense of purpose. One quotation sums up the general feeling from all staff interviewed in that academy:

What changes do I want? ... I want some vision and some coherence from the top that pulls everybody together, so we're all kind of doing what we're doing. It feels like at the moment we're constantly being hammered and monitored and overlooked ... [Principal] is at fine at saying, 'This is where we are and it's serious and this is what we need to do'. But if there's no kind of passion and if I don't believe in what he's saying, it just feels like it's a script that is being read as opposed to someone's true feelings (Middle leader, academy 6).

While we should be careful of attributing cause and effect, it was also notable that this academy failed to reach the required Ofsted standards on the inspection following our visit – although the examination results in the summer of 2014 met the Department for Education (DfE) floor standards.

In the following sections, we discuss the different measures leaders in these coastal academies have taken to realise their vision of changing young people's lives.

4.2 Early measures

This section focuses on the actions that Principals took upon appointment to failing schools, with their main focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning. For the quotations, we draw on the data from academies 2, 5 and 6 that were failing at the time that the interviewed Principal was appointed, but the section is informed by the previous round of research undertaken in 2011.

4.2.1 Engaging students with learning at school

In general, academies reported that getting students to attend the academy, and then to behave appropriately, was important in raising examination performance standards. However this was not considered enough to encourage students to take their learning seriously, and one Principal spoke of a parallel process in which developing students' wider interests and offering them a range of different opportunities was as important as raising the quality of teaching and learning:

Interviewer: ... *are you saying that the extracurricular ... is just as important [as teaching and learning]?*

Principal: *It's parallel really, because if you don't create an environment where we can get the kids to buy in, we're not going to get those exam results. So you're trying to develop the person as well as the academic and unless you develop the person ... they're not going to do it (Principal, academy 5).*

Strategies to encourage students to 'buy in' to learning emphasised looking beyond the school gates and involving students with different aspects of business, community and social life. They included: termly attendance reward trips for students achieving high levels of attendance, with a right of appeal for those who had external reasons for their absence; projects with local companies to offer work experience during school time; running sports events for pupils from local primary schools; a 'house' system that encouraged all students to become involved in different activities such as raising funds for charity, running events, leading activities in the school library; partnerships with schools in other countries; and an emphasis on learning outside the classroom that included trips abroad, to local places of historical interest and residential visits. As the same Principal remarked:

We'll just grab anything that makes a difference and kind of excites the kids ... You need a hook and there's a massive amount of stuff goes on behind the scenes to hook, to get [to] the academic (Principal, academy 5).

4.2.2 Raising the quality of teaching and learning

The 'parallel' process of improving the quality of teaching and learning was equally important, and school leaders implemented a range of strategies that provided teaching staff with both support and challenge. These included:

- **Raising expectations**

All principals spoke of the need to raise teacher expectations, both in their work in the classroom and in their approach to change:

I've attempted to bring some challenge and some pace into the school ... to establish the mentality that that change can actually start tomorrow ... that things can be tackled with a degree of urgency (Principal, academy 2).

All school leaders managed the process of improving teacher quality differently; because of the difficulties of recruitment, one academy, for instance, took a long-term approach by restructuring learning from Year 7, allowing change to work its way up through the academy with the expectation that the cohort of long-standing teachers would retire rather than leave, thereby opening up the opportunity to recruit more dynamic teachers in their place. A more common model, however, was to insist on new standards of performance; a demand that some teachers found extremely difficult:

Quite a few staff by the Christmas of the first year came to see me and said, 'We need to talk to you', sat down in here and just said, 'I can't do this, I can't do the pace that you want me to do'. And I just said, 'Okay, I'll help you to go, but we're not changing that pace' (Principal, academy 5).

Leaders reported two critical issues in managing this difficult process of raising standards with creating and maintaining what one Principal called '*an acceptable morale*' among staff. These were to ensure first, that teachers had the focused CPD necessary to improve their performance:

... we've spent astronomical amounts of time and money training staff ... That is priority. So if somebody comes to me and says, 'I'm doing media and the course is in London, can I go?', the answer is, 'Yes you can'. 'Can I go and do something airy fairy?', 'No you can't, but you can do anything related to the exams' (Principal, academy 5).

The second concerned creating a manageable pace of change, with a clear direction for improvement:

I think something which appears to have broken the cycle [of low performance] here is looking at the pressure on improvement from the point of view of the teacher and making sure they're not swamped. And so from January we've operated on 20 day improvement windows where we've publically said to our staff, 'In the next 20 days, we want to focus on this and we want to see improvement'. And so that's given a very sharp focus to what everybody's been doing (Principal, academy 2).

Those academies with educational sponsors reported mixed levels of support in this process; some universities and or other educational establishments provided significant input into school improvement, while others remained absent. This inconsistency provided a contrast with the support from the multi-academy trust sponsors, who provided literacy and numeracy consultants together with peer-to-peer support for teachers within classrooms and with data analysis.

- ***Ensuring teacher attendance***

Long-term staff sickness was an issue in all academies at some point, and this was regarded as presenting difficulties with both student learning and the budget, a critical issue in all schools that faced financial difficulties. One Principal argued that high levels of teacher attendance were:

... a key performance indicator in the school ... It's really important to secure good teacher attendance. Otherwise you'll never improve because you've constantly got voids in day-to-day teaching and the academy budget haemorrhaging because you're double paying; you're paying for your substantive teacher and you're also paying a premium rate for a temporary supply and invariably that doesn't manifest itself in good progress of students (Principal, academy 2).

Measures to improve teacher attendance again included elements of support:

... staff who work really hard ... I back them to the hilt. So, you know [a staff member] will say to me 'I'm struggling'; I'll say, 'Right, what can we do?' (Principal, academy 5).

and challenge. One middle leader spelt out the potential consequences of taking a hard line with long-term absence:

Well I think [Principal] is perhaps taking a bit of a hard line with it [long-term absence] and has started to call people on it and say 'Look, are you really fit for work?' ... previous Heads have been quite sympathetic to it: 'Oh of course, we'll get cover in for you'. I don't think he'll have [made] many friends by doing it, but he'll probably stabilise the school a lot

faster and that of course means there's a younger staff coming though
(Middle leader, academy 2).

- **Improving the quality of data**

All academy leaders spoke of the importance of establishing a system for generating accurate school data, which enabled a *'forensic approach'* to monitoring and evaluating student progress. This included *'being clear'* about what students could do, and being able to explain to them what they needed to do better within a particular period; one Principal argued that this was important because *'too often teaching is driven by a scheme of work'* which means that teachers can *'lose sight'* of the bigger picture of student overall progress. In turn this required improving the quality of ongoing progress and attainment data, *'smarter'* use of this tracking data to gain evidence of if/how student attainment gaps were closing, thereby supporting a more targeted or personalised approach to individual student progress.

Other important uses of data included identifying future potential *'pinch points'* related to staffing levels and timetabling, enabling the formation of contingency plans in case of future difficulty.

- **Accommodating new policy directions**

In our previous round of research, we found that academies were moving towards longer lessons of 90 – 100 minutes. This time, however, we found that one Principal was shortening lesson length to 60 minutes because:

In my view, the quality of teaching wasn't strong enough to support long lessons because I think ... 90 minute lessons taught in an academy where there were significant staff changes within a year are a recipe for disaster. But my own reading of curriculum change was that really ... we're reverting to a curriculum which is delivered through subject labels and so some of the programmes, some of the integrated learning programmes which are really characterised by long lessons, or the vocational BTEC programmes, have certainly gone out of favour ... We need to prepare youngsters more thoroughly for the exam regime which we're expecting to be in place by 2017, which is basically students doing a traditional-looking curriculum and sitting all the exams in one session and having to, well, maybe not recite the answers to pre-known questions, but it won't be massively different from that, having to go through the rigours of a fairly traditional testing regime (Principal, academy 2)

Similarly, a flexible approach to restructuring was needed in the light of probable policy change while, at the same time, offering staff continuity in terms of employment:

I think it's a mistake to think you're always finished restructuring in terms of leadership, because one constantly has to review the impact of leadership on what comes next. And so we're in that constant process of changing and I increasingly use the term interim leadership positions so the people are substantive. The actual role they're holding at that time is relevant to the next period ... because the danger of course in schools, in stability, is that people have their job and they continue to have their job even though there's no longer a need for that job in its entirety. And the worst mistake that happens is that constant over-layers of new jobs are put in to compensate with leadership. Not an option here because of the severe budget position which the academy has faced (Principal, academy 2).

4.2.3 Capacity building

While some newly-appointed Principals brought a team of senior leaders with them into the academy, others – for a variety of reasons that included difficulties with recruitment and/or being an interim head who was unwilling to destabilise a challenging situation further by introducing a new team – worked with the people who were already in post; the aim for all was:

... to increase the pace of change in leadership and to become far sharper in terms of strategic improvement (Principal, academy 2).

Measures put into place towards this end included reviewing roles and reviewing the expectations of leadership; one principal immediately put all middle leaders on the leadership salary scale, which ensured that these staff felt valued while substantially raising expectations about their performance. Another critical measure was to link with good leadership in other schools. One principal pointed out, however, that any leadership development should be rooted in the academy's own experience, with external support deployed to work with academy staff on particular areas in which they have expertise:

I don't want my staff to replicate what somebody's doing already, I want them to understand the journey they've come on and then to know what they're going to do next and the mistakes they've made and that's our starting point. Otherwise you're always three years behind ... I want to work with somebody who's done that particular aspect of the work particularly well, that ... understands the journey (Principal, academy 2).

Principals reported a similar focused approach to supporting classroom teachers:

... the position of this academy is that we'll be at the front of any network which is taking place. And so therefore if there's a subject network where only one person attends, I'll make sure it's my member of staff that's

there, that's benefiting disproportionately from that resource. And then also trying to put the message across that, although we are a sponsored academy, we want to be at the forefront of improvement [in this area]
(Principal, academy 2).

These measures of developing, supporting and tapping into local networks for school improvement chimes well with the current policy drive for a self-improving school system (DfE, 2010) in which school improvement becomes the collective responsibility of schools (Hargreaves, 2014, p.699).

4.2.4 Sponsor support

Sponsor support from the educational sponsors was variable, with some academies reporting high levels of challenge and support, and others reporting little activity of any kind. The two that were part of a multi-academy trust reported high levels of initial support but variable amounts thereafter; the one academy with only non-educational sponsors reported high levels of support with human resources (HR), business models and with the management of facilities.

Key points

Evidence in this section shows that academy leaders have had two main foci on appointment to failing schools: improving student engagement with learning, and improving the pace and quality of teaching and learning through a range of different measures. A chief concern was maintaining staff morale while undertaking significant change to staffing levels and responsibilities, and principals believed it important that staff had sufficient support as well as challenge during this critical time.

Section 5: New challenges

You never get to a point where you feel you've cracked it (Principal, academy 4).

This section focuses on the consolidation and progression work in academies 1, 3, 4 and 5 that have shown (largely) sustained improvement in the time since conversion. We have divided these measures into student behaviour, staffing issues and teaching aspirations, and working with the community.

All principals spoke of the need to ensure that they remained focused on the key tasks of engaging students with their learning and improving teaching and learning within the academy:

... it's very easy to think that because it's gone so well up until now that this is a normal school because actually, for the children coming through, until we fix the community issues, those children when they arrive to us in Year 7 are not that much different to when they arrived to us in the [predecessor school] times. And yes, there are structures that make it easier for us to deal with in some ways, but unless we are every bit as dedicated and as hard working, enthusiastic and all those things towards those children, then we won't have the results that we have had. And it would be remarkably easy to drift back (Principal, academy 3).

5.1 Student behaviour

Staff from these four academies reported that behaviour was now good, but that it was important that teacher expectations rose as students behaved more appropriately within the academy: *'I want people to be disappointed when we have minor poor behaviour'* (Principal, academy 4). This was related to the academies' efforts to encourage students to be more mature and *'to learn for them rather than forcing them to learn'* (Principal, academy 5); for students to understand the 'point' of education and the part that they could play in the process. One interviewee recounted how they had introduced the positions of head boy and head girl, noting how the culture had changed among students to accept this type of responsibility:

... you couldn't have introduced prefects and head boy and head girl three years ago; they would have been pilloried. It wasn't the culture of the school to want to aspire to do anything else than sit in the back of the classroom and be, you know, a little bit the clown or, you know, rude etc. So that's quite a big sort of step forward that we felt we were able to do that and not only did I do it, it's taken off (Academy 3).

Other measures to involve students in school leadership and management included:

- Sixth formers running clubs on subjects such as Manga and Japanese.
- Introducing lead students / ambassadors to undertake break time duties, or to meet and greet visitors.
- Expanding the academy-wide leaders' programme to include peer mentoring and other activities for all ages, with a formal application process.
- Encouraging student voice through a Young Leaders' Group. One example of this work involved students with designing new curricula around citizenship and sex education: *'it's really benefited the academy because the students feel that it's their subject and they designed it ... so they will go with it'* (Principal, academy 3).
- Introducing 'behaviour for learning champions' who were trained to help within the classroom, for example in familiarising supply teachers with academy processes. Staff reported that these were often students who had had behaviour problems in the past but who had taken the added responsibility seriously.

Measures introduced to widen students' experience with the aim of raising aspirations included:

- Introducing such activities as dance, cricket and football widely through the academy.
- Successfully applying for funding for a full-sized 3G football pitch; encouraging local community groups to use it.
- Working with the Ministry of Defence to establish a combined Cadet Force on the school site which *'we think will be good for order, discipline, routines, careers ... and again, it's a hook in for a different type of child'* (Principal, academy 5).
- The sponsors providing different business links for the academy to set up a range of joint projects.
- Staff from local businesses volunteering in the academy for an hour a week.
- Introducing an application process for teachers to take students on cultural trips.
- Introducing a wide range of extra-curricular clubs.
- University trips.
- Linking with a local independent (fee-paying) school so that sixth-form leavers could work during their gap year at the academy. One group of these students swam the channel during their placement, which was seen to provide *'inspiration'* to academy students.

Supporting students through their secondary education was also seen as key, and different procedures included assigning a key adult to each student in one academy, and each member of the executive team working with 15 students to guide them when selecting GCSE options in Year 9 in another. Other support structures included a behaviour learning zone for students with significant difficulties; a Specialist Leader of Education for behaviour; the appointment of non-teaching welfare officers; employing an anti-bullying counsellor for one day a week; and training support staff in behaviour management strategies. One academy reported significant bullying problems with the social media website Facebook, which they attempted to *'nip in the bud as best we can'* (Principal, academy 5) through assemblies,

plays and lessons on e-safety, but leaders said that they were prepared to involve the police if necessary for a student's safety.

Summing up at the end of the interview, one principal provided an illustration of the way in which these academies had widened the scope of their activities and expectations as they had made clear academic progress:

I think our development plan has gone around two areas and I think they are the key to our vision ... One is around making sure that every student in this geographical area has the ability to achieve the best they can academically, whether that be going to university ultimately or whether that be getting enough to go and do their apprenticeship. That's one side to it. But as results have improved, that has been able to change so it also now includes: let's prepare these children and our wider community to function in society and we can actually now focus on those softer skills as well as just the academic (Principal, academy 4).

5.2 Staffing issues and teaching aspirations

All academies reported ongoing issues with staffing, although an improvement in the reputation of two academies had meant that they were now able to recruit high-quality teachers: *'the word is out that we're doing okay and that you're kind of looked after [as a staff member]'* (Principal, academy 5). Others were focusing on a 'grow-your-own' approach that included:

- A structured programme of CPD for TAs / HLTAs to encourage them to become teachers if they wished.
- Tapping into local SCITT schemes of School Direct and/or Teach First
- Providing placements for PGCE students with a view to appointment at the end of their training.
- Drawing on the expertise of a local university (where possible) for CPD.
- Introducing raising attainment coaches with relevant subject degrees to work with small groups of students, and encouraging these to become qualified teachers in the longer term.

All four of these academies reported that they had a renewed focus on the quality of teaching and learning, partly to fulfil their ambition to be graded 'Outstanding' by Ofsted, but also because they were recognising that, as student behaviour improved, so lesson content became more important. One senior leader explained how academy expectations had been raised:

... the challenges are different. It's a new one now, to those staff who we fought to get behaviour and control in the lessons ... We've managed to ensure that is the case ... but that's no longer enough. It's no longer

good enough ... we want to be 'Outstanding' and to do that you need to have pace and challenge in the lessons, academic rigour. So that's quite difficult now for the staff. And that's the next challenge for the leadership, is that sort of vision of 'Outstanding' teaching, which is not just [that] the kids are now engaged and there's lots of good activities going on ... it's about academic rigour and high academic standards and pushing them all the time to higher and better things (Senior leader, academy 5).

However this process was given added complexity in one academy located in an area in which overall student numbers were falling and which still maintained a selective system; the effect of selection was that parents were likely to select the safer option of a grammar school for high-ability students, with difficult consequences for the non-selective academy. The quotation below reinforces the point made by principals in Section 3.3 about the significant barriers to becoming an 'Outstanding' school in these challenging areas:

We are taking a bigger percentage [of students] than we ever have done before of the primary schools, so we're successful in that sense. But unfortunately, because the grammar schools still take the same number of children out of a smaller pot ... what actually is happening is that our intake is decreasing even further in terms of Key Stage 2 results and prior ability and attainment. So if you look at things like the current floor target type measures, they are getting harder and harder for us to achieve. Even if what we're doing stayed the same, our results will go down (Principal, academy 3).

However raising expectations can be difficult, and there was a danger of what one principal termed '*transformational fatigue*'; yet more change can be morale-sapping for the staff. One senior leader explained the situation:

... it's a different set of challenges and ... there's a ruthless side here going on underneath all the time. There was capability and the process was to move some of those terrible staff from the old school out and that happened very early on. And then those staff who are willing and engaged and buying into it have been great ... and now it's a really difficult one for those staff who have done everything that's been asked of them, to then say, 'Right now that's not quite good enough', in a way. We've not captured it in those terms but that's the message: 'You're going to have to change your practice now' (Senior leader, academy 5).

A critical point made in this context was that leadership through this change should be as inclusive as possible, drawing on and modifying where necessary established support structures to ensure teachers were able to cope with the renewed pressure. These

academies were beginning this process at the time of interview, and leaders spoke of five broad areas for their current and future aspirations:

- To take time to reflect on the standards to ensure that academy leaders knew exactly what was expected.
- To continue with CPD, monitoring its effectiveness and shifting focus where necessary to ensure that it met teachers' immediate needs.
- To encourage the students to become more independent in their learning.
- To ensure that systems and processes for staff accountability were sound; that there was clarity in staff roles.
- To make an improvement plan and then stick to it; to work on problems until their source is found and then to take appropriate measures.

5.3 Working with the community

One academy had been particularly proactive in their work with the community, arguing that they needed to support struggling primary schools in their attempts to raise local standards of attainment, and provide a community hub to support a range of local activities. Measures to support local primary schools '*without looking like a threat and taking over*' included:

- Covering planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time when primary schools struggled to recruit high quality teachers for this role.
- Developing a memorandum of understanding with local church schools. Recruiting governors to these primary schools has been difficult, and the academy has offered to '*lend*' governors in times of difficulty.
- A number of academy teachers becoming primary governors in local schools.
- Developing an agreement with primary schools whereby, if they are having difficulties with recruitment, the academy will offer a certain amount of teachers' time to cover the appropriate subjects until a new staff member is appointed.

The Principal reported that these different measures were having a number of different effects: they made the transition for Year 7 students easier in that they knew some teachers and were familiar with their teaching methods; they allowed the academy to get to know the pupil entrants in Year 7, so they were prepared for any behavioural or other issues when they arrived; and they sent out a positive message to local primaries to show the high-quality work that was happening within the academy, helping to reduce the poor reputation of the predecessor school. This academy had made a point of working with staff employed at the time of conversion to academy status, and the Principal believed that this stability was important in sending this message of improvement out to the local community.

Another academy had established an associated primary school, partly to raise the standard of Year 7 entrants but also to enable the development of strong relationships with the families of children that attend the primary; parents of primary school children tend to be more involved with their education than those of secondary schools, and this approach

contributes to the long-term academy plan to encourage the local community to use school facilities.

Other measures from these four academies included:

- Running 'open Saturdays' for possible Year 7 entrants that included performances such as African drumming, running local art and 'bake off' competitions that make the day into a community event.
- Running a community leisure centre close to the academy site.
- Applying for/receiving funding to build a self-financing local community 'hub' building to accommodate local mental health, Council and/or other services, and to provide convenient meeting spaces for local community members. The process of building had also provided opportunities for apprenticeships for academy students and this, in turn, has opened up other potentially helpful links with businesses and children's services.

5.4 Key points

This section demonstrates how these academies have widened their range of activities to encourage students to become engaged with their own learning and to broaden their range of experiences to raise aspirations. Some have taken carefully-targeted actions to improve relations with the local community and to support local primary schools in raising their attainment levels. Most reported that behaviour was no longer an issue, and that the academy could now focus on improving the standard of teaching and learning with the ambition to become an 'Outstanding' academy. The challenges to this, however, remain significant.

Section 6: Conclusion

This section brings our report to a conclusion by offering an overview of each of the academies in the study, commenting on special and common features, leadership approach and student performance. We will also provide a summary of successes, key challenges and changing culture for the coastal academies involved in this research.

6.1 Special and common features

Each school responded in a different way to the specific challenges of their coastal location. However, all six academies have seen an improvement in student performance and have the following areas in common as part of their journey to school improvement:

- New principal/executive principal appointment upon conversion
- Academic priorities of raising student levels of achievement, initially by improving behaviour and encouraging students to have expectations for their future, then by focusing on high-quality teaching and learning
- Entrepreneurial leadership style that looks beyond the school gates to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and to widen student experience
- Shared vision with clarity of targets and accountability
- Investment in staff through CPD
- Greater teacher commitment to high-quality learning and of stronger student engagement with learning
- Encouraging staff to be active participants in facilitating change
- Where possible, using sponsor expertise to develop and support educational change

6.2 Successes

In Section 4 we demonstrated that academy leaders have had two main foci on appointment to failing schools: improving student engagement with learning, and improving the pace and quality of teaching and learning through a range of different measures. A chief concern was maintaining staff morale while undertaking significant change to staffing levels and responsibilities, and principals believed it important that staff had sufficient support as well as challenge during this critical time.

Section 5 showed how established and improving academies have widened their range of activities to encourage students to become engaged with their own learning and to broaden their range of experiences to raise aspirations. Some had taken carefully-targeted actions to improve relations with the local community and to support local primary schools in raising their attainment levels. Most reported that behaviour was no longer an issue, and that the academy could now focus on improving the standard of teaching and learning with the ambition to become an 'Outstanding' academy.

If the performance data for 2013/14 is recognised as non-comparative with previous years due to the change in measurement, a clear success for all the academies in the study was to

have met or exceed the DfE floor target for achievement by 2012/13, with some significant increases in the percentage of students achieving 5 GCSEs including Maths and English A*-C in three of the academies. Four academies in the study were graded 'good' by Ofsted in their latest inspection, and were judged to be supporting students in making good progress, with strong teaching and learning; one of the two academies in special measures has now had this categorisation removed. However, although the 'Value Added' of these participating academies demonstrates that they were providing enhanced learning to students, this is not always enough to meet government expectations:

I think that's the issue that is coming through with all the academies at the moment, that the value added that the academies are bringing to what were these 'National Challenge' schools has been exceptional, but they're not necessarily meeting the national average. And that is the problem; it's making the government and the public and the locals really aware that it [the academy] is making great strides forward (Teacher, Academy 4).

6.3 Key challenges

In Section 3 we identified the challenges identified by academy leaders to changing culture in their schools for school improvement. The key challenges in these coastal academies included:

- educational isolation
- difficulties with staff recruitment
- failing local primaries
- engaging students and their families with education
- student behaviour (at least in the first few years)
- the quality of teaching and learning within the school
- the shifting priorities of educational policy.

Some had experienced initial problems with local politics during the process of conversion to academy status, but these issues had subsequently settled down.

New challenges emerging for these schools were seen as a consequence of national education policy and include radical changes in education policy for 2014/15:

- * New curriculum in each subject
- * New methods of assessing learning progress (no more 'levels', school autonomy in assessing learning)
- * New measure of student performance (value added across 8 subjects – 'progress 8')
- * New approach to formal examining of student learning (linear examinations).

Interviewees reported that these changes would not only change the 'goal posts' for measuring performance, but change the way in which teachers would need to teach and assess in order to support learners in engaging in a new system of national examinations.

For staff the challenges were focused on the personal, with significant commitment needed to engage with the new systems and expectations of a school looking to make rapid improvement:

I think staff morale fluctuates throughout the year ... they're very tired at the moment; they're dealing with a lot of changes (Teacher, Academy 1).

It's hard to fit ... the extra training and support around my lessons that I have to teach (Teacher, Academy 3).

6.4 Changing culture

School culture is 'the integration of environmental, organisational and experiential features of school existence to offer a context for teaching and learning and its subsequent improvement' (Glover and Coleman, 2005, p. 266).

The need for a change in culture to bring about a rapid level of school improvement in these academies was supported and enabled by the following:

- Focus on the quality of teaching to enhance learning
- Focused CPD activity
- Targeted teaching and learning interventions enhancements
- Use of data to track student progress
- Curricular changes
- Addressing behavioural issues
- A strict new uniform (in most academies)
- Balance between rewards and sanctions
- High expectations of staff and students
- 'Grow your own' approach to developing teachers and school leaders

Staff interviewed reported that each academy was changing in culture and that this was having a positive impact on teaching, learning, behaviour, attendance and community reputation: the '*hardest nut to crack*' (Principal, Academy 1).

'I was saying to a student the other day, I can't remember what he was doing, he was refusing to do something, 'People don't do that any more!' And it was like, 'Yeah, you're right' (Teacher, Academy 1).

'I think when you're seeing all these good changes, then the kids are thinking, 'Right, I need to change the way I behave, I need to change the way I'm dressing myself, I need to fit in to this new environment ... I think it's had a very positive effect overall, becoming an academy'
(Teacher, Academy 3).

The coastal academies in this report clearly have challenges to face, but they have made and are making substantial progress with some of the most socio-economically disadvantaged students in England.

References

- BBC News (2015) *Ofsted to inspect but not judge academy chains*. Online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-30952906>.
- Bush, T. and Glover, D. (2014) School leadership models: what do we know?, *School Leadership and Management*, 34(5), pp.553-571.
- Chapman, C. (2013) Academy Federations, Chains, and Teaching Schools in England: Reflections on Leadership, Policy, and Practice, *Journal of School Choice: International Research and Reform*, 7(3), pp.334-352.
- Department for Communities and Local Government (2012) *Policy: Supporting economic development projects in coastal and seaside areas*. Online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/supporting-economic-development-projects-in-coastal-and-seaside-areas--4>
- Department for Education (2015) *Measuring the performance of schools within academy chains and local authorities*. Online: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/415659/SFR09_2015.pdf.
- Department for Education (2010). *White Paper: The importance of teaching*, London: HMSO.
- Department for Education (2012) *Attainment at Key Stage 4 by pupils in Academies 2011*. DFE-RR223. Online: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/AllRsgPublications/Page10/DFE-RR223>.
- Glover, D. and Coleman, M. (2005) School Culture, Climate and Ethos: interchangeable or distinctive concepts? *Journal of In-Service Education* 31(2): 251-271.
- Greany, T. and Scott, J. (2013) *Conflicts of interest in academy sponsorship arrangements: a report for the Education Select Committee*. Online: <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/Education/Conflicts-of-interest-in-academies-report.pdf>.
- Hargreaves, D. (2014) A self-improving school system and its potential for reducing inequality, *Oxford Review of Education*, 40(6), pp.696-714.
- Machin, S. and Veroit, J. (2011) *Changing School Autonomy: Academy Schools and their Introduction to England's Education*. Online: <http://cee.lse.ac.uk/ceedps/ceedp123.pdf>.
- Ofsted (2013) *Inspections of Schools, Colleges and Children's Services*. London, Ofsted.

Online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/too-many-of-englands-poorest-let-down-by-education-system>

Pearson/RSA. (2013). *Unleashing greatness: Getting the best from an academized system* (Report of the Academies Commission). Online: <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/unleashing-greatness.pdf>.

Pike, M. (2010) Transaction and transformation at Trinity: private sponsorship, core values and Christian ethos at England's most improved academy, *Oxford Review of Education*, 36(6), pp.749-765.

West, A. and Bailey, E. (2013) The Development of the Academies Programme: 'Privatising' School-Based Education in England 1986–2013, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 61(2), pp.137-159.

Weale, S. (2014) Out in the cold: the coastal schools neglected by national initiatives, *Guardian*, 15 October. Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/oct/15/coastal-schools-neglected-by-national-initiatives>.

Woods, P., Woods, G. and Gunter, H. (2007) Academy schools and entrepreneurialism in education, *Journal of Education Policy*, 22(2), pp. 237-259.

Copyright: Dr Tanya Ovenden-Hope and Dr Rowena Passy
Tanya.ovendenhope@cornwall.ac.uk
R.Passy@plymouth.ac.uk

A report by Plymouth University and The Cornwall College Group 2015