

# Anti Academies Alliance



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## Too much Power?

By Francis Beckett

### What is the most powerful organisation in secondary education?

A good case can be made out for the United Church Schools Trust. The biggest academy sponsor (through its subsidiary, the United Learning Trust), with thirteen already set up and several more on the way, the UCST also owns eleven private fee-charging schools and employs 1700 people.

It controls hundreds of millions of pounds worth of public assets and property (it will not say exactly how much), and gets more every year. It has spent hundreds of millions of pounds of public money building its academies, and the taxpayer will pay it hundreds of millions more every year to use them.

It is therefore very powerful in education, and earns a great deal of money from the public purse. It controls its 24 schools in a more centralised way than any local education authority has ever done. Key

management decisions, which in other schools are taken by the head or the governors, are taken at its corporate headquarters in the Northamptonshire village of Titchmarsh.

### Corporate feel

All its academies have websites in the same ULT house style, and the ULT's address is on each home page. It has a very corporate feel. This, says chief executive Sir Ewan Harper, "promotes our family of schools and academies." But he points out that each school has its own uniform, and heads and local governing bodies still take "critical" decisions. It is corporate about its Christianity, ensuring that all its schools have a Christian "ethos" – its patrons are the Archbishops of Canterbury and York.

Few sponsors exercise as much centralised control as ULT. In an ordinary state school the governors – parents, teachers, co-opted members of the local community – appoint heads. In a ULT school, the appointment

is made centrally. It's like a big company appointing a local branch manager. "We don't feel at all constrained by government" its chief executive, Sir Ewan Harper, told the Policy Exchange recently. "And we don't need to worry about the priorities of local government."

It likes to appoint internally – to grow its own people, as the management jargon has it. UCST has its own MA in school leadership at Warwick University, and a target of 50 per cent of all appointments to be made internally within two years.

"We think it is important to have a reasonable continuity around job promotions within the group" says Sir Ewan. The target "will give us a strong balance between those with home-grown experience and others bringing an essential element of fresh blood to challenge us and bring other experiences and best practice from outside the organisation." The MA "will give our

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employees more and better training than would be available elsewhere in the education sector.”

## **Most powerful person**

If UCST is the most powerful body in education, 69-year-old Sir Ewan, who has run it since 1990 and whose personal control is remarked on by visitors, bids fair to be the most powerful person. A tall, stiff, formal figure, grey-suited, grey-haired, white-shirted, he was educated at Marlborough, one of Britain’s most splendid public schools, where the late Sir John Betjeman was beaten and bullied and wrote of the “Doom, shivering doom” that “filters down from God, to Master’s Lodge/Through housemasters and prefects to the fags.”

He is a JP and a member of the Athenaeum and the MCC. He has been a governor of Benenden and Oundle, two very splendid and expensive public schools. He was managing director of the family firm, Harper and Tunstall, between 1972 and 1987.

He is, in short, an English gentleman and a Christian. He does not take kindly to being treated less than seriously, and does not see why he should listen to people who disagree with him. He cancelled the interview with me, for an article in the Guardian, to which he had agreed a month earlier,

citing my anti-academy views. He apparently discovered them from reading my book and from a speech I gave. (Oddly, he knew when he agreed to the interview that the book is called *The Great City Academy Fraud*, which must have given him some clue about what it contained.)

He even wrote to the Guardian asking for a different journalist to be sent, since my opinions were not acceptable to him.

## **Secrecy**

“I’m sorry” a ULT academy head teachers told me apologetically. “I can’t talk to journalists without permission from Head Office.” Permission was not granted (later Sir Ewan claimed this was partly the head’s own decision) and a full account of all my conversations with ULT heads went to corporate HQ in Titchmarsh HQ the same day.

ULT heads behave a little like branch managers – when Titchmarsh says “jump” they only ask “how high.” This runs the risk that its 21 schools, all over the country, may start to live in a kind of bubble, instead of cross-fertilising with the rest of the nation’s schools.

This secrecy enables it to be very flexible politically. Its website used to say: “City Academy status has only been offered to the worst performing

schools in the country.” Today, as ULT itself takes over schools which were not performing badly, that line has been quietly excised.

ULT schools have a “faith room,” used for “reflection” - effectively the old-fashioned school chapel, though people of faiths other than Christianity may use it.

All applicants for headships are asked what their religious position is, and whether they feel able to work in an organisation with “a Christian ethos like ours.” Are all ULT heads Christians, I asked? They are not all “active Christians” replied Sir Ewan.

In the small Sussex market town of Midhurst, ULT is expected to take delivery in September of Midhurst Grammar School (it’s a comprehensive, but is called a grammar school for historical reasons.) It was rapidly improving and came out of special measures in July. ULT and the council intended to keep the plan under wraps until April 28. They reckoned without local resident Simon Boxley, who put in a request to know under the Freedom of Information Act.

## **Out of town exam factory**

Midhurst Grammar School, founded in 1675 and occupying a very fine old building in the

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middle of the old market town, is to be closed, and its buildings and land sold off. In its place there is to be a modern out-of-town building owned and controlled by ULT. "It's an out of town exam factory. It's like replacing the local butcher and baker in town with an out-of-town Tesco" says Simon Boxley. "The ULT model is very corporate, its materials and methods are very standardised." Sir Ewan says no final decisions on buildings have yet been taken.

Sir Ewan spent much of his recent talk to the Policy Exchange chilling the blood with tales of how dreadful education was in Sheffield before ULT turned up. The predominantly Conservative audience loved his demolition job on the socialist council.

## **Does it work?**

Centralised and autocratic they may be, but does it work? Does the UCST and ULT method produce results? Not really, no.

One of the UCST fee-charging schools, Hull Collegiate School, appeared in the recent Financial Times league tables as having declined more than any of the other 1,000 schools. The reason for the decline becomes clear if you read its last inspection report.

Inspectors returned over and

over again to what they obviously saw as underlying problem: too much reliance on didactic teaching methods, which meant pupils were not challenged sufficiently. This rather fits in with the autocratic approach of UCST itself.

## **Paddington Academy**

ULT's vastly expensive Paddington Academy, into which tens of millions of pounds of public money have already been poured, is not a success. One principal and two deputy principals have left, the building was not ready in time, the results are poor. Some teachers are angry at the arrival of an organisation called Human-Utopia to work with students. One teacher tells me: "I was very uncomfortable about this because I felt that it capitalised on emotionally vulnerable students. Students were encouraged to 'share' very personal things in a very public way."

I do not know what ULT is going to do about Paddington, because as soon as I moved onto it, Sir Ewan said he had had enough questions and wouldn't answer any more.

When it took over two Sheffield schools, ULT appointed an overall chief executive, David Lewis, to run both schools, and made the heads report to him. It was soon apparent that Mr

Lewis and Andy Gardner, the much respected head of Park Academy, could not get on, and Mr Gardner left.

Last summer's GCSE scores were good. But Andy Gardner points out that these were the same pupils, with the same teachers, who had been in the school for four years before ULT came on the scene, and for whom the projections already made had simply been fulfilled.

Two teachers told me that pupil behaviour has become worse since Gardner left. Sir Ewan insisted it has improved. I have no way of being certain which is right.

## **Who gives ULT money?**

What I do know is that UCST is now a huge player in education. Its academies educate thousands of pupils whose parents used to have some say in the running of their local school, and have it no longer. Yet it is unable to tell me the value of the public assets it has taken over or the names of many of the people or organisations that give it money, and sees no reason why it should. Perhaps so wealthy and powerful a player in state education ought to learn to be accountable.

*A shorter version of this article appeared in the Guardian on May 13 2008.*