

A study into the applicability of **Operational Excellence** to education systems

Executive abstract



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper focuses on the importance of Operational Excellence (OpEx) as a discipline for the non-teaching “central functions”¹ of school trusts (trusts). It is positioned as **an enabler of excellence in the delivery of teaching and learning**, which this paper calls Educational Excellence, **by helping to create the conditions where schools can focus on education**.

By engaging with this research, leaders across the education sector will be better placed to respond to compliance requirements and adhere to recently published guidance from the Department for Education, in particular Trust Quality Descriptions. In addition to demonstrating how OpEx facilitates Educational Excellence, benefits will also include **the creation of capacity within stretched resources, improved operational risk management, and culture change**.

Researchers visited ten trusts to understand their current operational practices. The evidence, combined with a range of interviews and expert input, revealed that there are already pockets of good practice. This is commendable, especially in view of the relative newness of the trust sector. That said, given the sector’s challenges, funding constraints, and a shortage of sector-specific training, it is not a surprise that general OpEx capability in trusts is low in comparison to other sectors.

While potentially seen as a negative, **the low current level of embedded OpEx practice represents a great opportunity for the sector**.

OpEx has the potential to significantly improve the performance of central functions and, in doing so, very likely positively influence educational outcomes. Implementing OpEx requires the investment of time and resources, but this investment will pay for itself many times over.

This paper introduces the **Operational Excellence Framework for Schools and Trusts**, which has been specifically designed to provide practical guidance. The framework enables trusts to self-reflect and identify priority areas for focus. In addition, we describe approaches to implementing OpEx in trusts, including the importance of developing skills in-house and the role of leadership in ensuring success and sustainability.

However, it must be emphasised that OpEx can only be successful if the culture of the trust is right. **CEOs need to actively lead the OpEx initiative**, and the executive team must role-model and reward the desired behaviours and new working disciplines. The research identifies 14 cultural barriers to OpEx in the sector and provides a vision of “what it feels like” to work in an organisation of excellence.

¹Also called support services/central services/business support, the functions within a trust that are not directly concerned with teaching & learning, such as finance, HR, procurement, technology, data, catering, cleaning, estates, marketing, and PR

“I can already see how I can use this to drive improvements across the trust”

Lee Miller MBE, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Thinking Schools Academy Trust

“A really insightful piece of work and something we are going to include as a key strategy in our 24/25 business plan”

Chris Wiseman, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, E-ACT



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INTRODUCTION BY **STEPHEN MORALES**

School business leadership and operational management has evolved over the years into a very sophisticated and complex set of disciplines. It is over a decade since the Quiet Revolution publication, where Geoff Southworth eulogised about the positive impact of school business professionals.

Operational Excellence (OpEx) is the natural next step in the sector's improvement journey.

Schools and trusts are complex organisations, but just like any other sector, in the end, their success depends on their people, their processes, and how both are managed. By focusing on how people work, what they do, and why they do it, it is possible to refine the execution of an operating model to greatly improve efficiency and effectiveness.

OpEx is customer-centric; in the context of education, this means teachers and pupils. We understand that the word customer conjures an image of something that is paid for, and therefore, whilst a useful descriptor for industry, it is not applicable to state education. However, a dictionary search reveals that the definition includes "a person of a specified kind with whom one has to deal". We should not feel uncomfortable about being held to account for the services we provide or the way we "deal" with colleagues, other departments, or wider stakeholders. In fact, we should take great pride in the way we interact and the quality of service we provide.



"The pursuit of perfection is a journey that never ends."

By supporting a school or trust to look at what its teachers and pupils value and need, OpEx aims to enable the organisational strategy, operating model, people, and processes to meet their requirements. Business processes inherently carry with them inefficiency and lead people to behave in a particular way. If processes are complex and indeed sometimes broken, then even the performance of the best people will be inhibited.

This report does not claim to represent practice across the entire system. However, our sample covers many regions and a healthy spread of small, medium and larger trusts, including those that have only recently converted. The intention was an attempt to identify any evidence of embedded OpEx practice. It is also important to be clear that Operational Excellence is not an absolute judgement, it is a systematic approach. Indeed, we would actively discourage another judgement being placed on schools.

Whilst we did observe lots of good practice, we saw very little evidence of a deliberate and embedded approach to OpEx. This should not be seen as a deficit situation but as a huge opportunity for improvement, that can be taken at a pace right for any given context.

The pursuit of perfection is a journey that never ends. How much energy you expend in that pursuit is an individual choice. Through this initiative what we aim to do is to give schools and trusts some of the tools and ingredients that will help optimise their operations.

STEPHEN MORALES

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, ISBL

"Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence."

- Vince Lombardi

"We are what we repeatedly do. Therefore, excellence is not an act, but a habit."

- Will Durant

Part One. Research objective, **scope,** and **approach**

This paper aims to make the case that Operational Excellence (OpEx) should be a core discipline for all school trusts (trusts). We will explain what OpEx is and why trusts should be interested, drawing on its success in other sectors but, more importantly, elucidating the potential benefits specific to a trust.

The full paper aims to be a practical guide to the implementation of OpEx in a trust setting. **This paper is a shortened executive abstract** aimed at executive leaders and trustees. Throughout this version, signposts will point to greater detail to be found in the full paper.



Scope of this research

This paper steers away from a focus on teaching and learning practice. There exists already a significant body of literature, research, and practical guidance on educational improvement. In this paper, we use the term Educational Excellence to refer to the quest for excellence in teaching and learning and the delivery of great outcomes.

Instead, this paper invites into the limelight the elements of a trust's activities that need more focus: the support services. They comprise all of the other trust functions: finance, HR, payroll, procurement, contract/supplier management, technology services, estates management, administration, catering, cleaning, strategy, risk, governance, marketing, public relations, organisational development, and change management. We use Operational Excellence to refer to excellence in non-teaching activities.

In looking at trusts, we must take account of the variety that exists. We aim to provide guidance to all, no matter their size, geography, maturity, rate of growth, or operating model.

A one-size-fits-all approach to OpEx would in fact fit none. These guidelines are designed to be interpreted in different ways by different trusts, applicable to their own context, giving each trust the best chance of fulfilling its potential amidst real-world constraints.

A significant proportion of the trust landscape is made up of single-academy trusts (SATs). Our recommended implementation approach is deliberately flexible to apply to trusts of all sizes. We contend that OpEx would deliver the same benefits to maintained schools as it would to trusts, providing it is sympathetically applied in the same way it would be for SATs.

This paper builds on literature and materials on OpEx available in the public domain, adding thinking specific to the education sector and trusts in particular. Models and concepts that are proven elsewhere are expected to have equal power in trusts if suitably adapted.

Part Two. What is Operational Excellence?

To create a definition that works for trusts, we need to base it on some key concepts: customer focus,² great execution (delivery of intended results), proactive real-time management of work, continuous improvement, and unlocking the power of teams. We therefore offer the following **definition of OpEx for a trust's central functions:**

“Operational Excellence enables Teaching Excellence by engaging central-function staff and teams to understand the needs of their customers (schools, pupils, and other stakeholders) and deliver every non-teaching process right first time, on time, every time.”

Ten principles of Operational Excellence

The following ten principles³ help to bring to life the disciplines at the heart of OpEx:



1. We focus on our customers' needs



2. We continually improve



3. We capture and roll out the “one best way”



4. We empower and engage our employees



5. We make decisions based on good data and insight



6. We are agile and flexible



7. We all understand our true performance



8. We adopt Lean Thinking in everything we do



9. We continually invest in improving our people's skills



10. Our leaders show commitment and support



In the full report

More detailed explanations of the ten principles

Success in other sectors

In 2024, OpEx tools and techniques are found in most commercial sector, and many public sector, organisations. OpEx has been proven time and again to deliver real, tangible benefits to organisations that adopt it. The best leaders understand it, invest in it and reap the rewards.

As a comparator to education, consolidation of central functions into “shared services” functions in the National Health Service (NHS) has been underway since the mid-2000s. As early as 2010, research demonstrated the successful use of OpEx tools and techniques, although the term “Operational Excellence” was not often used. Anglia Support Partnership (a shared services unit at one time supporting 26 NHS organisations), for example, was at the forefront of deploying Lean and OpEx tools and reported cost benefits of circa 20%.

This demonstrates that the NHS is ahead of education in some respects, particularly in adopting the concept of the **customer** (the internal recipient of the service). However, progressive reorganisation of the NHS trust system since 2010 has delayed true exemplars of OpEx, upon which education could draw, from yet emerging.

² See section 3 for a discussion of the concept of customers for central functions

³ Adapted from “What is Operational Excellence? The 2024 Guide” by Pipefy

Part Three. Why is Operational Excellence important to school trusts?

The challenges facing trusts

During the research, senior executives talked at length about the challenges facing trusts, including educational challenges (outcomes, behaviours, attendance, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and safeguarding), cost pressures, growth and competition, retention/recruitment, accountability/control, and inability to truly understand operational performance.

Adopting OpEx across the central functions of a trust can assist with all of these challenges, either directly or, for example in the case of the pursuit of Educational Excellence, indirectly.

Who is the customer?

Before we can discuss the potential benefits of OpEx to trusts, we must tackle one vital question from an OpEx perspective: Who is the customer?

A core principle of OpEx is that we should align all of our processes and resources to deliver exactly what the customer wants, right first time. Anything not directly contributing to meeting the customer's needs is unnecessary and so an improvement opportunity.

Many within the sector are resistant to the word "customer", perceiving it to be tainted by association with commercial enterprise. Yet, the concept of **"the person whom we serve"** (with no commercial connotations, but purely a focus on providing the best possible service) must become a central part of the culture of trusts if they want to become operationally excellent. If there is no customer, and so no understanding of their needs, then there can be no focus to activity and no definition of what excellence in operational practice looks like.

Teams and individuals can have multiple customers. The finance function, for example, is serving head teachers, the executive, the board, and regulatory agencies such as the Department for Education (DfE). This is not a contradiction but a fact of life. Every function's goal is to meet all of its customers' needs.

This paper contends, however, that **the primary customers of the central functions of a trust are the head teachers, school senior leadership team, and teaching staff in the schools.**

This contention arises from focusing on the reason for the trust's existence – to maximise the quality of education and the academic outcomes. This drive for Educational Excellence is the core mission of any educational establishment.

"Every child deserves to be the best they can be."

East Midlands Academy Trust

If we are to deliver on that mission, then every function in the trust must align with that primary goal. If we do not, then we will not achieve it.

Pyramid model

We use an inverted pyramid model (see fig. 1) to clarify who are the customers of the individual parts of a trust. The inverted pyramid⁴ places the “most important people at the top”. In the case of a trust, **the most important people are the pupils** (and their parents/carers).

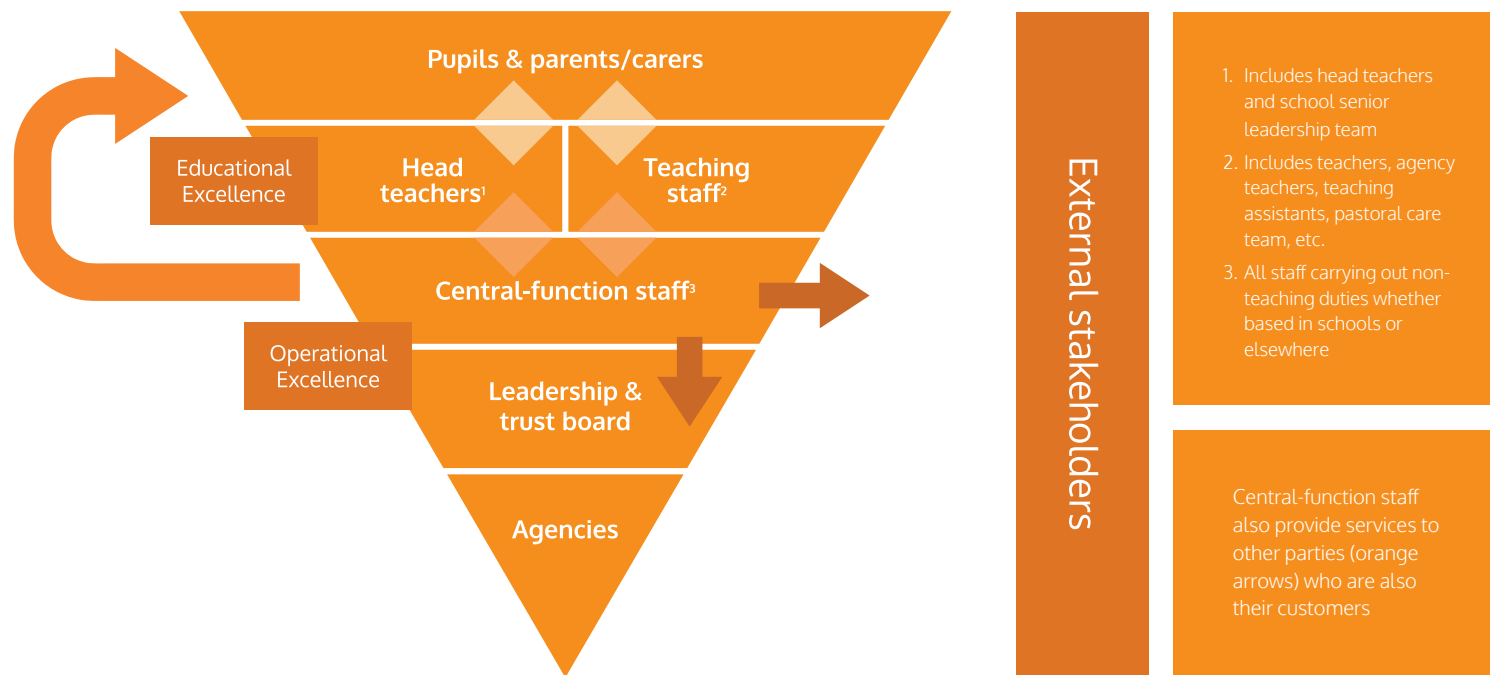


Fig. 1: The inverted pyramid model of a trust

While the pupils are the ultimate customers of the trust as a whole, for the central-function teams, the **primary** customers of their services are the head teachers/senior leadership team and the teaching staff. In addition to servicing pure customers, we should be conscious of the significant time and effort required to meet our regulatory obligations to various agencies.

Aligning central functions to support Teaching Excellence

Those primarily delivering services to the pupils are the teaching staff (including teaching assistants, pastoral care, and agency teachers), who provide direct education and development, and the head teachers and school leadership team, who, in addition, create the conditions for teaching and learning success.

The primary role of the central functions, therefore, must be to support the head teachers and teaching staff to enable them to focus on their core roles. This concept of “**internal customers**”⁵ aligns all the functions in the trust towards the core outcome.

Although there are alternatives to the word “customer”, there is a wealth of research and guidance available on the subjects of **customer service**, **customer experience**, and **customer journeys** that is of great potential value to the sector. We recommend that the term “customer”, used in the sense of “**the person whom we serve**”, should be adopted across central functions to focus the understanding of needs and measure the success of service delivery. **This is already the case in the US**, where our research suggests the concept of customers, internal and external, is very much part of school-district culture for the central functions.

⁴*Adapted to organisations by Jan Carlzon in his book “Moments of Truth”*

⁵*First developed by Kaoru Ishikawa and now adopted across the world to align quality along a process*

Four benefits of Operational Excellence

Benefit 1: Enabling educational excellence

The current Workload Reduction Taskforce paper (January 2024) highlights that some parts of a teacher's job are unnecessarily burdensome, listing 24 examples of administrative tasks.

There was ample evidence from the trust visits and research interviews that **administrative processes in trusts create waste in schools**. Examples include forms that take too long to complete, duplicate data entry, errors that result in rework, wasted time resulting from poor communication, and many more.

OpEx can help to create the conditions for Educational Excellence in two ways:

1. By giving the teachers and head teachers everything they need to do their jobs well (computers that work, lesson materials when they are needed, high-quality recruits, etc.)

2. By taking away waste that prevents them from being able to do their jobs well

Another potential benefit of OpEx is an increase in staff motivation through **seeing that things are improving**. This "hope for the future" could help to reduce attrition among school staff.

Benefit 2: Capacity creation

The trust visits highlighted many examples of waste in central-function teams, driven by inefficient processes, defects, miscommunication, weak operations management, inefficient allocation of resources to work, and staff with insufficient process skills.

OpEx systematically reduces these sources of waste. The consequence is to free up time in everyone's day, more formally referred to as **creating capacity**, which can typically be used in three ways:

1. By moving work around, roles can be freed up and released, resulting in cost savings

2. The time can be reinvested in activities that are perceived to be of more value

3. To absorb more academics without needing to grow the central team proportionately

Benefit 3: Operational risk management

Most trust boards would claim that they have strong risk management due to the requirements of good governance. The trust visits, however, revealed a common blind spot: that of **operational risk management** due to weaknesses in process and quality control.

While there are policies and procedures in place to manage risk, we found that **understanding and use of in-process quality control is limited**. This is the discipline of looking at the work being done, assessing its quality, and ensuring that corrective actions are in place. Without this, procedures and policies can give a false level of confidence that risk is being controlled at the front line. OpEx includes a suite of quality-management tools that enable boards to sleep soundly, knowing that there is robust real-time control of the work being done.

Benefit 4: Culture change

Conversations with trusts that have begun to invest in OpEx revealed that their efforts have had a significant impact on the trust's culture. Looking at processes and errors end to end has created conversations between staff members and improved cooperation and teamwork.



In the full report

The four "levers" of benefit creation (process, work organisation, operations management, and quality) are brought to life

Part Four. Operational Excellence Framework for Schools and Trusts

In this paper, we introduce for the first time practical, hands-on guidance on “what good looks like” specifically for trusts: the **Operational Excellence Framework for Schools and Trusts**.

The framework is a series of statements of what good looks like, divided into **ten domains**. It is deliberately flexible and applicable to all types of work, which is important if it is to be used trust-wide. Within each domain, there are between six and ten statements of best practice.

The framework is complementary to documents like the Academy Trust Handbook, the Trust Quality Descriptions, and the Chief Executive Content Framework.

- Impact on Teaching and Learning
- Process and Quality Control
- Resource Planning and Deployment
- Data, Performance Measurement, and Action
- Skills and Human Performance
- Operations Management Capability
- Operational Risk and Quality Assurance
- Productivity and Cost Control
- Technology Effectiveness
- Continuous Improvement

In publishing the framework, it is important to be clear about what it is **not** designed to be: it is **not** designed to be a scoreable audit that would add more stress for CEOs; it is not designed to teach professionals (such as CFOs) how to do their jobs; and it is not about strategy – it’s about the execution of daily operational activities.

The full framework across all domains is available as a companion document to this report.

Part Five. The current state of Operational Excellence in school trusts

The ten trust visits revealed existing pockets of good practice. This is commendable, especially in view of the relatively embryonic state of the trust sector. That said, given the sector's challenges, funding constraints, and a shortage of sector-specific training, it is not a surprise that general OpEx capability in trusts is low in comparison to other sectors.

Good examples tended to be of specific techniques in specific functions – so good practice in the finance team, for example, was not yet being replicated elsewhere. Individual trusts are developing approaches in specific aspects of OpEx (e.g. Productivity and Cost Control) but have opportunities to tackle more of the domains of the framework.

The best trusts in our sample were actively working on OpEx-style initiatives, with good results and momentum. Progress is being made but is not yet approaching “world class”. This, however, is good news – with such a level of improvement available, OpEx has the potential to make a significant impact in the sector and so to help tackle some of the challenges trusts are facing.

At a high level, looking across the sample of trusts, strengths and weaknesses were found to be:

- **good examples of:** customer focus, process control, resource flexibility, improvement (informal/unstructured), use of data, technology effectiveness, procurement cost control, operational risk management
- **some evidence of:** balanced scorecards/KPIs, effective dashboards, coaching to improve process performance, people performance management
- **little evidence of:** quality control, improvement (formal/structured), work measurement and capacity planning, team-based performance measures, operations management training and skills, appropriate spans of control.



In the full report

Detailed commentary on each of the ten domains, including examples of good practice from each of the trusts visited, with improvement areas highlighted

International perspectives

ISBL contacts in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand were engaged to understand whether there are exemplars of OpEx already developed on which English trusts could draw.

The summary of the information gathered is that those international school systems do not appear to be substantially further ahead in OpEx than trusts in England.

- In the US, there is a parallel between school districts and English trusts in that they are groups of schools with central control. Our research suggests that, while there are pockets of good practice, there is no system-wide embedding of OpEx from which the UK can learn. The exception to this is that our research suggests that **school district central functions are very much at home with the concept of the “internal customer” and commonly use customer-centric language** when referring to their interactions with schools.
- The Australian and New Zealand school systems are more similar to England’s local authority system. This provides some benefits, such as resources (buildings, core infrastructure, and ongoing professional learning). However, as with the US and the UK, there do not appear to be obvious exemplars of OpEx to which English trusts can turn.



In the full report

A discussion of the impacts of different trust operating models, from centralised to devolved and regional to national, on OpEx approaches.

Size of the prize

It is not unusual to hear objections such as “We haven’t got time to do this”. However, this is not the case: the time is currently occupied by waste and inefficiency. The resources invested in getting things right first time should be more than repaid by the benefits of doing so (if done well).

Based on dozens of examples⁶ of OpEx implementations in organisations from a wide range of sectors, sizes, types of work, and levels of maturity, we are able to state with confidence that **most trusts have a minimum capacity creation opportunity of 20–30% in their central functions.**⁷ This capacity can be unlocked by the systematic elimination of waste from every task, process, and role and so would be progressively realised over time. This is probably an underestimate of the true opportunity, but it needs to be tempered by some of the challenges of realising benefits (such as TUPE/contracts, small team sizes, and the constraints of trust financing).

⁶The authors’ own experiences include more than 100 projects in organisations from a range of sectors including public sector/government bodies, commercial organisations (financial services, utilities, healthcare, outsourcing, manufacturing, logistics, and others), charities, and regulatory bodies.

⁷In the authors’ experience, any team that has not implemented OpEx has at least this figure available. Rapid implementations (see next section) regularly deliver 10–20% in just a few months just by focusing on the low-hanging fruit, with the internal team then able to deliver further benefits over time.

Part Six. How to implement Operational Excellence

Implementation approaches

There are typically three ways to approach an OpEx implementation:

- **rapid implementations** (short, intense bursts, usually 10–16 weeks)
- **training-led implementations** (training managers and then tasking them with deploying the learning)
- **champion-led implementations** (training OpEx champions to coach change among their colleagues).

For most trusts, a **combination of training- and champion-led implementation is likely to be the most effective approach**. The role of champion could be assumed by school business professionals, or there could be champions in each function. While trusts may struggle to have full-time OpEx champion roles (although this should not be ruled out, especially in larger trusts), the organisation must back itself that the investment in OpEx will be more than repaid by the benefits. A **pilot-to-prove** approach is highly recommended to create learning that will shortcut roll-out and create success stories and “pull” from the rest of the trust.



In the full report

Typical training and coaching requirements for trustees, executive teams, central-function staff and OpEx champions, plus sources of training support

Organisational roles and structures: some implications of OpEx implementation

Detailed day-to-day operational management of the work and the staff is vital in an OpEx environment. This “team leader” role is often missing in a trust environment, or the skills required for it are not embedded; this is a core challenge that must be overcome.

The role of OpEx champion (typically a senior leader) would help trusts to adopt the new techniques. Champions should be embedded for a significant period (at least one year, often permanent roles). They might combine their champion duties with another role. School business professionals, whether they are centrally or locally aligned, would be ideal candidates.

The importance of active senior leadership of any OpEx initiative cannot be overstated. In most cases, if an OpEx implementation is flawed, lack of leadership interest/drive (and constant purpose over time) is the root cause. Leaders need to make time, on a regular basis, to visit teams, discuss performance, coach improvement, and reinforce disciplines.



In the full report

More detail of the implications of OpEx implementation on the structures and roles in the trust’s central functions including an OpEx “Centre of Excellence”



In the full report

Article: “Enabling Operational Excellence through good technology and data” by Chris Kenyon, CEO, The Key Group

Part Seven. Developing a culture of Operational Excellence

Cultural barriers to OpEx observed in trusts

The impact of culture on OpEx cannot be overstated. Organisations that do not consider cultural factors cannot expect to become “excellent”. While the culture of each trust is unique, a number of sector-wide cultural barriers to OpEx have been identified. Tackling the 14 barriers summarised below would make the journey to OpEx more impactful.

1

Cultural observation 1: Threat is endemic

Attempts to create “accountability” have created an environment where failure or error can have severe consequences. **Boards and external bodies must support executive teams to create a culture where there is no jeopardy if decisions are made in good faith.**

2

Cultural observation 2: Fear drives waste

“Covering your back” is an instinctive behaviour that impacts the effectiveness of the trust by creating wasteful activity. **Boards and external parties need to understand the impacts of demands they make; governance requirements should be proportionate and achieved in the most efficient and effective way.**

3

Cultural observation 3: The unsophisticated trustee

Trustees are volunteers and sometimes “enthusiastic amateurs” in education, even though they may be experienced in their own fields. **The education of trustees needs to include their role in enabling/allowing the trust to function to maximum effect. A good understanding of OpEx is an essential part of this.**



4

Cultural observation 4: Lack of data-driven management

There are not enough meaningful key performance indicators in the central functions. Only a few dashboards or balanced scorecards exist showing actionable insights. Data is not presented in ways that drive understanding or improvement. **Managers, executives, and trustees should be educated in the sophisticated interpretation of data and should also aim for maximum insight with minimum overhead.**

5

Cultural observation 5: Variable staff performance

The pool of staff in education contains some excellent individuals, but there seems to be less drive to tackle underperformance than in commercial organisations (partly explained by union interactions, legacy contracts, and TUPE arrangements). There is limited data to enable effective performance management for individuals but, more importantly, there are no team KPIs, performance charts, improvement goals, etc. **The team should be the focus of great performance management, with the right metrics used by good team leaders to motivate the performance of all.**

6

Cultural observation 6: Operations is an undervalued discipline

A shortage of operations skills means that emerging solutions to the evolution of the sector are not necessarily being driven by the best thinking. There is a risk that new processes and ways of working are designed by the old guard and so are no more effective than the old systems. Operations strategy and operating model design are missing skill sets. **Operations should be seen as a key skill set, in the same way as finance and HR. Operations professionals (such as school business professionals) should have a solid grounding in all operations disciplines.**

7

Cultural observation 7: The natural response is bureaucratic

Innate responses have a tendency to be bureaucratic rather than agile and effective. That is not true of all, but it does feel like a cultural norm for many. There is an underlying desire in the sector to keep everyone “safe”, and this means that innovation is seen as risky. **Leaders must learn, and then role-model and reinforce, more agile and effective ways of working. Innovation should be recognised positively.**

8

Cultural observation 8: Fortress education

The education system is seen as a public service, and, in some cases, it resists concepts/ideas from other sectors. **“Stealing with pride” from other sectors should be rewarded as a desired behaviour: to take what is available and adapt it to the sector rather than reject anything not already education-ready.**

9

Cultural observation 9: A two-tier system

The main focus of trusts is, quite rightly, quality of education. There seems to be a blind spot in recognising the important role that central functions, and so the excellence of those functions and their staff, play in giving the schools headroom to work on Educational Excellence. **Culturally, the operational side of the trust should be seen to be as important as the educational side. Trustees have a role in ensuring this balance is in place; an example would be fair investment in staff training and development.**

10

Cultural observation 10: Improvement is not “the way we work around here”

Most central-function staff do not recognise their role as being one of improvement. “School improvement” dominates trust thinking and is driven by the Ofsted agenda. Most staff do not “see” the waste in their work. **Lean Thinking is an essential skill for all; it is the first step in kick-starting improvement.**

11

Cultural observation 11: Control rather than delegation

OpEx requires real-time decision-making and a continuous drive for small improvements. This can only work if decision-making is delegated (appropriately) as close to the work as possible. **The mindset of trustees and executives needs to move away from “control by central decision making” to “oversight of the risk and quality system”, backed by the design of effective real-world control systems and training of staff.**

12

Cultural observation 12: "Right first time" is not a mantra

While staff undeniably want to "do a good job", the idea that errors should be systematically driven out of processes and tasks is not commonplace. The result is constant low levels of defects consuming resource time. **Everyone should begin a relentless drive for "right first time" in everything they do.**

13

Cultural observation 13: Effectiveness of change

Formal change management methodologies are rare, and change communication is patchy. Many changes land poorly, resulting in unintended negative impacts and reluctance of staff to adopt new ways of working. **Excellence in change design and delivery should be far more of a focus. Change needs to be positively led, from the board down, with more emphasis on the people side.**

14

Cultural observation 14: Can we cope? (Nobody knows)

Understanding of the capacity of systems (teams, people, the entire trust) and how it compares to demand is limited. As a result, work can be layered on with no understanding of its potential impact. In some cases, there will be genuine latent capacity; in others, there is major overload; in both cases, it is typically unquantified. **It should never be assumed that systems have the capacity for extra work or to absorb change. The capacity may be there; it is just that we must find data to make objective decisions.**



In the full report

More detail of the 14 cultural barriers observed in the trust system and recommendations on how they should be tackled



In the full report

A vision of a culture of Operational Excellence, plus a tool (the Culture Web) to assess culture in a tangible way and make specific planned changes



In the full report

A focus on project management and change management as underdeveloped disciplines without which operations are compromised

Conclusion

This research project has identified four key benefits of OpEx that are directly relevant to trusts given the challenges they face: **enabling Educational Excellence, capacity creation, operational risk management, and culture change.**

The trusts visited revealed some good examples of specific OpEx tools but also a fantastic opportunity to further improve the performance of central functions. This, in turn, can help to create the conditions for schools to focus on educational outcomes. Implementing OpEx does require an investment of time and resources. If done well, however, it should pay for itself many times over.

The Operational Excellence Framework for Schools and Trusts enables trusts to self-reflect and identify priority areas for focus. Alongside the OpEx tools and techniques, culture is key to successful implementation; the full paper provides cultural recommendations and a series of vision statements to illuminate what it feels like to work in an operationally excellent organisation.

OpEx is not a complex methodology. Its power is in simplicity and adaptability to any environment. The secret to success is consistent, committed leadership and a willingness to tackle old problems with a new mindset. The possibilities for school trusts are endless.

Possible next steps for trusts seeking to implement OpEx

- Identify external support to help get started (from ISBL or other bodies)
- Educate the board and executive team
- Decide on your implementation approach
- Identify and free up the resource
- Select the pilot area or process
- Train your people, spot some opportunities, and get started!
- In parallel, start to consider key enablers such as culture and measurement



To access a copy of the ISBL Operational Excellence Framework for Schools and Trusts and relevant training, visit www.isbl.org.uk or email training@isbl.org.uk.

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