



The Challenge of Embedding Character Education Across a Large Multi-Academy Trust

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‘The Challenge of Embedding Character Education Across a Large Multi-Academy Trust’

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Introduction

The implementation of character education within schools is increasingly becoming a central focus across the UK. Beyond academic achievement, schools understand their responsibility of developing and nurturing well-rounded individuals; equipping students with moral virtues such as empathy, integrity, and resilience. In the context of a large multi-academy trusts (MATs)¹, where schools vary in size, socio-economic backdrops, and resources, embedding character education presents significant challenges.

United Learning², the largest academy trust in the UK, has started to position itself to be at the forefront of character education, with a clear strategic ambition now in place to lead both nationally and internationally in character education. The Trust’s vision extends beyond simply high academic performance; it seeks to foster students who have character explicitly developed through the curriculum, co-curriculum and hidden curriculum by ensuring that it is caught, taught and sought in its delivery. However, achieving this vision across more than 55 secondary schools, each with its own unique set of challenges, is a significant undertaking.

This paper will explore the key challenges faced in embedding character education across a large multi-academy trust like United Learning, while also highlighting the strategies and interventions implemented to try and overcome these barriers. Through these insights, the experience of United Learning and this paper can hopefully offer valuable lessons for other schools seeking to implement character education on a larger scale.

Overview of United Learning

United Learning is currently the largest multi-academy trust in the UK, encompassing over 100 schools (primary, secondary, and independent), including 55 secondary schools spread across England, from Carlisle in the North to Bournemouth in the South. United Learning employs a ‘cluster model,’ whereby geographically close schools share resources and staffing more efficiently. The Trust focuses on transforming underperforming schools, many of which are situated in economically deprived areas. On average, 36% of pupils in United Learning secondary schools are eligible for Pupil Premium. This means over a third of pupils either come from families with household incomes below £7,400 at some point in the past six years or are Looked After Children or Previously Looked After Children. The Trust’s goal is to transform these schools into institutions grounded in both academic excellence and strong character development.

Under its current CEO, United Learning has maintained a clear and consistent position that, while academic success is important, the development of character is equally vital. Academic excellence must go hand-in-hand with virtues such as integrity, empathy, and resilience. This dual focus is embedded in the Trust’s *Framework for Excellence*, which outlines the principles that all United Learning schools follow. These principles underpin the Trust’s distinctive approach to education, defining the characteristics of an excellent school and guiding the strategy for improvement.

¹ Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) are trusts that operate more than one academy school. Academy schools are state-funded schools in England which are directly funded by the Department for Education and independent of local authority control.

² <https://unitedlearning.org.uk/>

The *Framework of Excellence* sets out the principles which all our United Learning schools work to. These principles represent United Learning’s distinctive approach to education and the characteristics which we believe will lead to excellence when exemplified in the right way. The Framework is also the way United Learning sets standards for its schools and evaluates progress.

The ‘Education with Character’ principle states:

‘Academic success is very important. Exam passes are an important aspect of that. But there is more to a good education. Our schools also aim to develop character, compassion and service. Youn people are expected to contribute to their school and to society; to try things which they think they cannot do; to persist in the face of difficulty; to become resilient in overcoming obstacles; to manage themselves; to work independently on things which challenge them; to work with others and in teams; to be courageous and caring; to lead. We want young people to look back on a joyful schooling which has inspired and challenged them, given them wide opportunities and prepared them for the ups and downs of life’

The principle, whilst remaining steadfast in its ideology, has been updated in terms of what is meant by character as a Trust. The definition of ‘being of good character’ within the Trust is seen as:

‘Being ‘of good character’: someone is ‘of good character’ if they have the integrity to do the right thing above pursuing their self-interest, giving in to social pressure or making attractive but poor choices. A person of good character ‘does the right thing even when no-one is looking’.

As a Trust it is important that children are not clones so we look at ensuring students are ‘full of character’ and keep their individuality. Whilst a key focus is also on developing the resilience that is needed for life’s ‘ups and downs’ – it is referred to as ‘having character’

One of United Learning’s key strategic priorities for the current year (2024-2025) is to systematically embed character education across all of its schools, with another key goal being the fostering of a sense of belonging in schools. In addition, the emphasis on character education is seen as essential to improving school attendance, behaviour, and overall culture.

To signpost United Learning’s commitment to character education, the Trust lead for Character has set a clear ambition: for all secondary schools to achieve the Character Quality Mark from the Association Character Education³ within three years, therefore, establishing all secondary schools across the Trust as flagship ‘Schools of Character.’ This ambitious goal reflects the seriousness with which the Trust approaches character education and its determination to invest in this area for the long term.

Main Challenges in Embedding Character Education at a Systems Level

Despite the clarity of the United Learning vision and the robustness of the strategic planning, embedding character education across such a large and varied organisation presents significant challenges. Some of these challenges are listed below and will be explored in this paper (please note this is not an exhaustive list and one of the aspects that is never to be underestimated is competing priorities in schools. Character should not be seen as ‘another thing’ but school should try to make it ‘everything’, and run through all aspects of a school):

³ <https://character-education.org.uk/>

1. **Staff Buy-In:** Securing commitment from all staff members across diverse schools.
2. **Different Contexts:** Schools within the trust operate in a wide variety of socioeconomic and cultural contexts.
3. **Varying Levels of Staffing and Capacity:** Schools differ significantly in terms of size and resources.
4. **Common Language and Understanding of Character:** Ensuring consistency in how character education is understood and communicated.
5. **Measuring Progress across the Trust:** Developing systems for tracking progress and identifying where additional support is needed at a systems level.
6. **Resources:** Providing adequate resources while avoiding an overly prescriptive one-size-fits all approach and implementation strategy.

1. Staff Buy-In

The first and perhaps most critical challenge is securing buy-in from all staff members, including teachers, support staff, and senior leaders. Across the secondary academies within United Learning, over 5,000 staff are employed. For character education to be successfully embedded, every staff member must understand its importance. Without a shared understanding of the value of character education, efforts to implement it are likely to be half-hearted, inconsistent, and ultimately ineffective.

At United Learning, this challenge is addressed through consistent and thorough communication of the rationale behind character education. Central and regional Trust leaders place significant emphasis on explaining the "why" of character education during every Trust-wide headteacher meeting and character lead meeting. Additionally, shared PowerPoint presentations are provided to schools to ensure they regularly have a clear and consistent understanding of why character education is a key focus.

An example of the 'why' being shared with schools is below:

- *Create a positive school culture in every secondary – better behaviour & relationships - Phronesis – more students (and staff) 'doing the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason'*
- *Building a 'sense of belonging' – set of values/virtues that resonate with our community & making our schools a 'place of joy' – charter will be one part of this – links to attendance improvements*
- *Moral imperative to develop strong citizens – 'flourishing individuals' – understanding clearly what is right vs wrong – Phronesis*
- *Helping our students to build up support networks – individuals with good character are more likely to have more stable friendship groups*
- *Improve employability of our students for the future – virtues/values are what employers are looking for – across all sectors*
- *Helping our students to handle pressure of school and home life by building strong character*
- *Improve exam outcomes for our students (not why we do it, but this is a product)*

One challenge related to securing buy-in is the reliance within the education sector on evidence and data to determine priorities. The absence of robust impact data for character education can present a barrier. While there is evidence to suggest that a sustained focus on character is associated with improved outcomes across various measures, as demonstrated in cases such as Northampton Academy (below), definitive impact data remains limited. Ultimately, it must be acknowledged that not everything of importance can be measured, and efforts to prioritise character education must continue despite this limitation.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	National average (at the time)
Fixed Term Exclusions (FTE) as % of group	20.22% (238 incidents)	15.46% (182 incidents)	7.67% (94 incidents)	10.13%
FTE with 1 or more	10.45% (123 students)	7.9% (93 students)	4.98% (61 students)	5.08%
FTE with more than 1	4.16% (49 students)	3.06% (36 students)	1.47% (18 students)	2.2%
Attendance	94.2%	94.4%	94.8%	94.5%
Persistent absenteeism	18.4%	15.9%	13.1%	13.9%
Progress 8 measure	0.06	0.07	0.64	0
Admissions (first choice)	224	248	298	N/A

United Learning also hosts “Excellence Days,” where schools from within the Trust that have excelled in character education are showcased. For example, Northampton Academy⁴, a Character Quality Mark Plus school, hosted 25 schools from within the Trust last year and Walthamstow Academy⁵, a school with a Character Quality Mark also hosted multiple schools in the group. These visits allow schools from across the Trust to learn from each other, sharing best practices and fostering a culture of collective learning. It also allows leaders from within the Trust to see what is possible when you truly invest in a systematic approach to developing character.

Character education is also within the Trusts termly monitoring cycle, ensuring that it remains a constant priority for school leaders. Through this constant reinforcement, United Learning has made significant progress in achieving widespread staff buy-in for character education. This has been highlighted recently when over 95% of the schools have character education as a priority in their overall school development plans.

2. Different Contexts

Research from the Jubilee Centre highlights the necessity of a context-specific approach to character education for successful implementation. A key challenge in embedding character education across a large multi-academy trust like United Learning is the diversity of contexts in which its schools operate. Some schools are situated in inner-city areas with high levels of deprivation, while others

⁴ <https://www.northampton-academy.org/>

⁵ <https://www.walthamstow-academy.org/>

serve suburban or rural communities. The Trust encompasses schools ranging from Bournemouth to Carlisle, many of which serve communities where Pupil Premium (PP) rates exceed 30%.

To address this diversity, United Learning has adopted a flexible approach to character education. While the Trust promotes a core set of values, individual schools are encouraged to develop their own context-specific values. This enables schools to tailor their character education programmes to the unique needs, challenges, and aspirations of their local communities. Schools that simply adopt United Learning's Trust-wide values without adaptation are prompted to reflect critically on their relevance. Leaders in these cases are asked to review and evaluate whether their chosen values authentically represent the school and community they serve.

Rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all approach, United Learning provides schools with a structured framework based on the Jubilee Centre's school self-evaluation handbook, adapted for use across the Trust. This tool supports schools in systematically embedding character education into all aspects of school life.

In addition to using the Trust's character education evaluation framework, secondary schools are required to annually review—and, if necessary, revise—their vision and/or mission statements to ensure explicit reference to character education. By embedding character development into a school's vision, schools underline its importance not only for staff and students but also for parents and the wider community. A school's vision or mission statement serves as a key tool in communicating the priority placed on character development to all stakeholders. Each school within the Trust submits its vision and values centrally for quality assurance by the Trust's Regional Director team, ensuring alignment with the overarching strategy.

3. Varying Levels of Staffing and Capacity

With secondary schools ranging in size from 400 to 2,000 pupils, the staffing capacity to deliver character education varies considerably across United Learning. Some schools have extensive leadership teams, while others have fewer resources and less capacity to dedicate to character education.

Every United Learning school has a designated *Character Lead*. This individual, normally a member of the senior leadership team, is tasked with driving and maintaining the character education programme within the school. However, the role of the Character Lead differs between schools, depending on their size and available capacity. In some schools, the role is undertaken by a Deputy Headteacher, while in others it is a standalone position, such as Director of Character. Having a dedicated member of staff for character education has proven highly effective; however, the ultimate requirement is that the Principal or Headteacher must fully support the school's character education approach for it to succeed.

Recognising the need to build capacity across its schools, this year United Learning has enrolled all its schools as members of the Association of Character Education (ACE). Through ACE, schools and their Character Leads will receive training on implementing and embedding whole-school character education. This training is designed to equip schools to develop their own staff members as *Character Practitioners*, ensuring that all staff possess the necessary skills to deliver character education consistently and effectively.

Additionally, United Learning will train five staff members to become ACE Quality Mark assessors. This initiative will build internal capacity, enabling the Trust to assess and support schools as they progress towards achieving the Character Quality Mark. New schools joining the Trust will also

receive training to ensure alignment with United Learning’s character education objectives from the outset.

The Trust has developed a new project called *Character Takeaways*. These are 15-minute sessions in which schools share best practices around character education—whether *taught, caught, or sought*—and answer questions about their approach. These videos are made available to all secondary schools within the Trust.

To further support schools, United Learning has established a *Character Working Party*, composed of practitioners from schools that have already achieved the Character Quality Mark. This group provides vital guidance and support to schools still embedding character education. Last year, 16 schools received targeted assistance through this initiative, reporting a 100% satisfaction rate and significant progress in their character education programmes. The Working Party is comprised of leaders from Trust schools with proven success in character education.

Recognising the importance of central and group-level leadership in character education, United Learning has recruited a Strategic Lead for Character. This individual works two days per week to support schools, with plans to potentially expand the role to full-time next year, depending on its impact. The Strategic Lead for Character collaborates closely with the Regional Director, who has overall strategic responsibility for character education in the Trust’s secondary schools.

4. Common Language and Understanding of Character

For character education to be effectively embedded across a large organisation and at a system-wide level, there must be a shared understanding of what is meant by character, character education, and related core terminology. Without a common language, character education risks becoming fragmented and inconsistent, both within individual schools and across the Trust as a whole.

To address this challenge, United Learning’s Secondary Regional Directors have established a set of key terms and definitions to be used consistently across all secondary schools within the Trust. These include definitions of virtues, values, and *phronesis* (practical wisdom). By providing a unified vocabulary, the secondary leadership team seeks to ensure alignment in the approach to character education throughout the Trust.

United Learning has also created a clear and relatable definition of character that resonates with both students and staff. The Trust defines someone as being “of good character” if they possess the integrity to do the right thing, even when it is challenging or unpopular. According to this definition, a person of good character “does the right thing even when no one is looking.” The Trust further emphasises that being of character involves demonstrating resilience to overcome difficulties while maintaining individuality and being “full of character.”

This shared language is reinforced across all levels of communication within the Trust. It features prominently in weekly updates, termly newsletters, shared resources, and Headteacher meetings. The consistent and persistent use of this language ensures its integration into the fabric of Trust-wide practices.

This shared vocabulary enables United Learning schools to align their vision, values, and character education programmes, fostering consistency across the Trust. More importantly, it ensures that character education is not perceived as an isolated initiative but is recognised as an integral part of school life and the wider school community.

5. Measurement of Progress across the Trust

The Trust recognises the importance of evaluating the success of its character education programmes and has developed several approaches to achieve this.

Firstly, United Learning has introduced a self-audit tool, completed by all secondary schools three times a year. This electronic tool allows the Trust to collect data, identify trends, and diagnose areas where schools may require additional support. The audit tool is based on the Jubilee Centre's evaluation framework and is directly linked to the principles of character education: *caught*, *taught*, and *sought*.

Although the self-audit process is still in its early stages, it has already proven valuable in identifying schools that need targeted intervention. Schools requesting support can choose from a flexible range of options, from a simple Teams call to a full-day visit. This tailored approach ensures that schools receive support appropriate to their specific needs.

Additionally, all United Learning secondary schools are now members of the Association of Character Education. This membership commits all schools to working towards achieving the Quality Mark or Quality Mark Plus, providing a tangible measure of success through externally validated review and accreditation.

This year, the Trust has also introduced a new initiative called the *Character Pupil Charter*. This charter outlines a specific set of activities designed to enhance students' experiences, aiming to shift the enrichment and experiential aspects of the *sought* dimension into the *taught* dimension. By encouraging pupils to step outside their comfort zones, the charter seeks to actively develop their character. Examples include whole year groups participating in residential trips and theatre visits.

To track the implementation of the charter, the Trust is collaborating with external organisations to develop a Trust-wide tracking system. This system will enable the rapid identification of barriers and facilitate the sharing of best practices across schools. The Trust's ambition is for every pupil to experience every aspect of the charter.

Through these initiatives, the Trust is laying the groundwork for consistent and measurable improvements in character education across its schools.

6. Resources

One of the final challenges in embedding character education is ensuring that schools have access to the necessary resources without imposing overly prescriptive guidelines on their use. United Learning is committed to striking a balance between providing support and allowing schools the flexibility to adapt their character education programmes to their unique contexts. The *Character Teaching Inventory* from the Jubilee Centre is shared with all schools, offering clear guidance on potential approaches and strategies for embedding character through the principles of *caught*, *taught*, and *sought*.

To further support schools, United Learning is developing a *resource bank portal* to house examples of best practices in character education from across the Trust. This resource bank will include assembly plans, lesson materials, and enrichment activities, all designed to assist schools in embedding character education effectively. By sharing these resources, schools can benefit from the experiences of others, saving time and avoiding the need to create materials from scratch. Schools will be able to download these resources and tailor them to their specific needs.

Through their membership, all schools also gain access to resources from the Association of Character Education (ACE), including materials from schools with the ACE Quality Mark. This external perspective enables schools to explore best practices beyond the Trust.

In addition to the resource bank, United Learning is in the process of developing a fully sequenced PSHE curriculum for Key Stage 3 pupils, with plans to extend this to other year groups in the future. These lessons will include explicit links to character education and will be informed by United Learning's common language of character. Furthermore, the Trust is creating high-quality assemblies centred on character education, which schools can adapt to complement their existing programmes.

Conclusion

Embedding character education across a large multi-academy trust, such as United Learning, is a complex and ongoing process. The challenges are numerous and varied, ranging from securing staff buy-in to addressing the diverse contexts in which schools operate and ensuring consistency in the language and understanding of character education. However, through careful strategic planning, the implementation of flexible frameworks, and the provision of targeted support, United Learning is making significant progress toward its goal of becoming a national and international leader in character education.

By maintaining a focus on both academic excellence and character development, United Learning is not only helping students succeed academically but also shaping them into morally conscious individuals who are equipped to contribute positively to society. The lessons learned from this paper can hopefully provide valuable insights for other multi-academy trusts and educational institutions seeking to embed character education. Ultimately, by prioritising character alongside academic achievement, United Learning is playing a vital role in preparing students for the challenges and opportunities of the future, fostering individuals who are not only successful but also resilient and of good character – 'Making the right decisions, at the right time, for the right reason.'