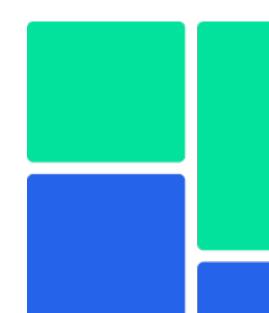# Discussing the Academy Trust Handbook 2025: Supporting a shift to 'digital leadership and governance'.

Edequity AI Briefing Paper

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1   Introduction

The Academy Trust Handbook 2025 produced by the Department for Education (DfE), effective 1 September 2025, introduces significant updates aimed at strengthening trust governance, financial oversight, and digital infrastructure. This briefing summarises the key changes and analyses how they elevate expectations for data-driven decision-making and digital capability in trust governance. It also outlines how Edequity AI's datalake Builder, marginalgains app, and Centre of Excellence align with and support trusts in meeting and exceeding the new requirements.

2   Key Changes in the 2025 Handbook

1. **Digital Infrastructure Standards by 2030**

   A cornerstone of the 2025 handbook is the explicit requirement that trusts work towards six core digital and technology standards by 2030 [2][4].

   These standards cover broadband internet, network switching, wireless networking, cyber security, web filtering and monitoring, and digital leadership and governance[2].

   In contrast to previous guidance, which urged trusts to "refer" to the standards, the new handbook expects boards to understand their present status and demonstrate progress on each standard [4]. Currently only around 16% of schools meet all these benchmarks, emphasising the scale of improvement needed sector-wide[1][4].

2. **Cybersecurity and Ransomware Resilience**

   Trusts are now explicitly prohibited from paying cyber ransoms to hackers [2][4].

   Previously, trusts had to seek permission before any ransom payment; now no ransom payments are allowed, with trusts expected to invest in robust cyber defences and incident response plans.

3. **Executive Pay: Transparency and "defensibility"**

   The 2025 handbook introduces clearer expectations on executive pay. Trust boards must ensure that CEO and senior leader remuneration is "transparent, proportional and defensible", and this approach must be documented in an agreed pay policy [3][4]. In practice, boards should follow a robust, evidence-based process for setting pay, including independent scrutiny and justification for salary levels[2].

4. **Financial Oversight, Data Use, and Repercussive Transactions**

   The handbook expands the definition of "repercussive" transactions, which now include any transaction likely to set a precedent or cause additional costs for other parts of government[3][4]. This expanded definition means boards must evaluate the wider system impact of novel decisions.

New guidance on "financial support and oversight" confirms that the DfE will analyse trusts' Budget Forecast Return (BFR) data to identify those at risk of financial difficulty and proactively engage with them[3]. This reflects a trend toward data analytics in governance, using timely financial and operational data to make informed decisions and to spot issues before they become crises[3].

5. **Governance and Intervention: Focus Shift from Performance to Compliance**

Educational performance has been removed as a trigger for formal intervention. The 2025 handbook specifies that Notices to Improve (NtIs) will no longer be issued for academic outcomes or school performance data, which refocuses oversight on the trust's operational integrity rather than direct student outcome metrics [2] [4].

3   Enabling a Data-Driven, Digitally Capable Trust: Support from Edequity AI

Meeting these enhanced requirements by 2030 will require trusts to build new capabilities in data management, analytics, and digital governance. Edequity AI's suite of tools and services is an infrastructure to support trusts in this transformation in a non-prescriptive, support-focused manner.

1. **Digital Leadership & Data Infrastructure**

Edequity AI's datalake Builder provides a cloud-based data architecture aligned to best practices, giving trusts a head start in achieving the "digital leadership and governance" standard. A centralised datalake breaks down silos by automatically aggregating data from all schools in the trust. Through integration with external systems such as IMP, trusts could consolidate quarterly budget and actual spending data into real-time financial dashboards accessible to the central team and trustees.

These capabilities would support the handbook's call for greater financial oversight and allow boards to spot early risks. A well-structured datalake also underpins strong cybersecurity by enforcing modern cloud security protocols and better data governance through consistent data definitions and audit trails.

2. **Cybersecurity and Analytics for Resilience**

Modern data infrastructure paired with analytics could markedly improve threat prevention and incident response. By integrating security logs and incident data into the datalake, trusts could leverage AI-driven anomaly detection to catch cyber threats early.

3. **Data Driven Executive Pay and Benchmarking**

The datalake could ingest publicly available pay data from sector reports, alongside the trust's internal data, enabling analytical comparisons of executive pay against benchmarks and performance outcomes. By presenting these metrics in a dashboard, boards gain broader context and evidence to defend or adjust pay decisions.

Edequity's Centre of Excellence can further assist by providing research and workshops on governance best practices, for example, training trustees on interpreting pay benchmarking data and on implementing "defensible" pay policies consistent with DfE guidance.

4. **marginalgains App for Continuous Improvement**

While the DfE may not intervene on educational performance now, trusts still strive for academic excellence. Edequity AI's marginalgains app leverages predictive analytics and AI to identify small, impactful improvements in teaching and operations. This tool allows trust leaders to experiment with interventions on a small scale and measure their effects in data terms. By quantifying marginal gains, the app fosters a culture of data-driven decision-making. Trustees and executives could use these insights to drive school improvement in evidence-based and sustainable ways.

If a proposed initiative could have far-reaching cost implications, the marginalgains tool can simulate outcomes, helping leaders foresee any repercussive effects before full rollout, aligning with caution around repercussive transactions.

5. **Centre of Excellence. Building Digital and Governance Capacity**

Building Digital and Governance Capacity: Edequity AI's's Centre of Excellence serves as a training and knowledge hub to build capacity in areas highlighted by the handbook. It offers workshops on topics like data-driven decision-making for boards, effective use of analytics in financial oversight, and cybersecurity governance for non-technical leaders.

This is not a one-off, but a continuous professional development approach, reflecting the handbook's advice that trusts pursue continuous improvement and not view compliance as a tick-box[2]. Over time, such capacity-building ensures that the trust's governance not only meets the minimum standards but becomes truly strategic and forward-looking, leveraging data as a strategic asset.

4   Conclusion

The 2025 Academy Trust Handbook signals a clear evolution in trust oversight: digital infrastructure and data capability are now integral to good governance, and accountability measures have sharpened around transparency, financial prudence, and risk management.

Edequity AI's tools- the datalake builder, marginalgains app, and Centre of Excellence – are aligned with this new direction. They serve as enabling infrastructure and support, helping trusts not only comply with the 2025 handbook requirements but go further to build resilient, insight-driven operations. By investing in these capabilities, trusts can transform mandatory compliance into an opportunity to future-proof their academies with strong digital foundations, robust safeguards against cyber and financial risks, and

a governance culture that harnesses data for the benefit of pupils and communities. This evidence-based, strategic approach will be crucial for Academy Trusts aiming to thrive under the increasing expectations set out towards 2030.

References

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[3] Tes Magazine. "Trusts told to set out 'defensible' executive pay policy". Tes Magazine, 2025.

[4] Schools Week. "Academy trust handbook 2025 changes: what leaders need to know". Schools Week, 2025.