THE MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST PAYROLL CHECKLIST:

WHAT TO ASK POTENTIAL PROVIDERS

Looking for multi-academy trust payroll support? Use this checklist to find the right payroll software for your MAT's needs.

Running multi-academy trust payroll across numerous schools is complex. Here's what your next provider needs to get it right.

As a multi-academy trust (MAT) leader, you want to focus on pupil outcomes – not on chasing payroll errors. The last thing your team needs are delayed payments, compliance headaches, and hours wasted fixing mistakes.

This checklist will help you find a provider that can keep up with your MAT's demands. Discover the must-haves to look for before selecting a payroll partner.

PAYROLL FOR ACADEMIES: WHY MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST ARE DIFFERENT

Unlike standalone schools, MATs often manage thousands of employees across multiple sites. Each site has different term-time patterns, pay dates, contract types, and pension schemes. That makes standard systems – or providers specialising in private-sector payroll – a poor fit.

Multi-academy trusts need a payroll provider that's built to handle complexity at scale. Take Teachers' Pensions, for example. MATs must submit monthly data through either MDC or MCR, depending on their scheme status. Get it wrong, and you risk underpayments, missed contributions, or late returns.

Not only does this impact staff confidence, but it might also affect staff retention. One in five teachers in large MATs left their job last year – the highest churn in the sector.

Add in rising budgetary pressures, and the stakes grow even higher. 37% of trusts expect reserves to dip below the 5% safety line within three years. Therefore, every overtime hour and supply-cover invoice is under scrutiny.

MATs need a payroll partner that understands how they're structured, can provide education-specific compliance, and offer real-time reporting. This is essential.

THE MAT PAYROLL PROVIDER CHECKLIST

Not every payroll provider understands the demands that MATs are under. Use this checklist to sense-check whether your partner can handle your trust's scale, complexity, and compliance demands.

1. Automated compliance and pension returns
Your provider should automate Teachers' Pensions and LGPS reporting – including support for both MDC and MCR – with built-in validation to catch errors before submission. This protects you from compliance breaches and late return penalties.

2. Clean data migration
If you're switching providers, you'll need a full, audited data transfer, including historical pay, pension, and role data. Ask how your provider ensures data continuity and sign-off before go-live. Don't risk delays or potential payroll issues in the middle of the school year.

3. Multi-establishment, multi-role flexibility
MATs need one system that can flex across multiple sites, contracts, and pay structures. Check whether your provider can support different payroll calendars, segmented cost centres, and separate access controls – all within a single platform.

4. Real-time reporting
You should be able to track key metrics like overtime, absence, and supply costs at trust or school level, without waiting for month-end. Look for dashboards that help you spot trends – not just process payslips.

5. Clear error-handling workflows
When issues do arise (like missing hours or duplicated entries), you need clear workflows that flag errors show the root cause, and get the right person to fix it. Ask who's accountable if something goes wrong: the provider, or your trust?

6. Education-specific expertise
Your payroll partner should speak your language, from understanding census dates to knowing how role identifiers affect pension contributions. Look for a team with direct experience in the education sector, not just generic payroll support.

7. Year-end readiness and ongoing support
MAT payroll doesn't stop at year-end. Confirm your provider offers proactive support through annual returns, statutory updates, and scheme changes.

8. Seamless system integrations
Check your provider integrates seamlessly with your HR, finance, and MIS systems. Manual file transfers are time-consuming and error-prone. Ask how payroll data flows into your finance software – and whether integrations are supported out of the box or DIY.

9. Robust data security
Your provider should meet modern security and compliance standards. This includes UK data hosting, ISO 27001 certification, and GDPR alignment. Ask for their latest penetration test results, and check what happens if there's a breach.

10. Easy employee self-service
Your team expects easy access to full HCM capability, including everything from payslips, P60s, and personal data to authorising absences and expenses, plus more.

11. Comprehensive statutory payments and deductions
From maternity pay to salary sacrifice, your provider should handle the full range of statutory payments and deductions. Don't rely on workarounds or spreadsheets for common processes like SMP, SSP, CIS, or the Apprenticeship Levy.

12. Strong support, with clear SLAs
Things go wrong – but your trust can't afford delays during payroll week. Ask about support hours, escalation routes, and what service levels are contractually guaranteed. Can you get someone on the phone at 8:00am on payday?

13. Flexible contracts and pricing
Your trust might grow over time. Your provider should offer pricing that scales clearly and fairly – without hidden fees when you add new schools, staff, or features.

14. Proactive compliance templates
Legislation moves fast. Choose a provider that updates its systems in line with Teachers' Pensions, HMRC, and LGPS changes – with no need for manual fixes or long delays.

TRANSFORM PAYROLL FOR ACADEMIES

For MATs, payroll is too important – and too complex – to leave to chance.

The right provider offers more than processing power. They bring sector expertise, built-in compliance, and the flexibility to match your trust's structure.

When payroll runs smoothly, everything else runs smoother – from budgeting and reporting to recruitment and retention.

Key takeaways

- MAT payroll is uniquely complex, with multiple sites, contracts, and pension schemes to manage.
- Choose a payroll provider that supports both MCR and MDC reporting for Teachers' Pensions.
- Ensure full historical payroll and pension data can be migrated, audited, and signed off before go-live.
- Insist on real-time reporting capabilities rather than having to wait until month-end.
- Look for education-specific experience, proven SLAs, and clear escalation routes during payroll week.

READY TO SIMPLIFY MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST HR & PAYROLL?

Find out how Zellis can help you simplify payroll across your trust.

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