Initial teacher training: is it fit for purpose?

Context

On 19 November 2015, SSAT invited a small group of politicians, policymakers, policy-shapers, academics, and school leaders to discuss the issue of initial teacher training and teacher recruitment. Professor John Howson, an expert on teacher supply and demand, a former government advisor and author of the popular blog 'Some stories behind the education numbers', gave an introduction, before discussions were opened to the table. This paper is intended to reflect the discussions, and suggest some implications for future policy, practice, and research. The attendees of the dinner were:

Dr Robin Bevan, *Headteacher, Southend High School for Boys*

Rod Bristow, *President, Pearson UK*

Ed Butcher, *Associate Director of Graduate Recruitment, Teach First*

Neil Carmichael MP, *Chair, House of Commons Education Select Committee*

Jonathan Clifton, *Associate Director for Public Services Reform, IPPR*

Nic Dakin MP, *Shadow Minister for Schools*

Professor Michael Day, *Deputy Provost, University of Roehampton*

Amy Finch, *Researcher, Reform*

Marie Hamer, *Head of ITT, Ark*

Matthew Hood, *Director, 21 Trust*

Professor John Howson, *Director, TeachVac*

James Kempton, *Clerk to the Board, The College of Teaching*

Laura McInerney, *Editor, Schools Week*

Loic Menzies, *Director, LKMCo*

Tom Middlehurst, *Head of Public Affairs, SSAT*

Will Millard, *External Relations Manager, The Key*

Stephen Munday CBE, *Chair, Independent Expert Group into Teacher Training*

Jo Palmer-Tweed, *Chair, Expert Subject Advisory Groups*

Professor Samantha Twiselton, *Director of Institute for Education, Sheffield Hallam University*

Bill Watkin, *Director of Policy and Public Affairs, SSAT*

Patrick Watson, *Managing Director, Montrose Public Affairs*

Sue Williamson, *Chief Executive, SSAT*

Introduction

The key question must be, argues Professor John Howson, whether the economist Lionel Robbins was wrong to remove teacher training and preparation from the schools themselves half-a-century ago. The decision to shut small mono-technic teacher training colleges run by local authorities formed the pattern of teaching preparation for most of the next thirty years.

The change was accompanied by a move to an almost all-graduate profession, championed vigorously by the teacher associations; at the same time there was a rapid move towards graduate PGCE training for most secondary subjects and a more gradual change away from undergraduate training for the primary sector.

During the teacher supply crisis of the late 1980s the first of the school-based routes appeared; Licensed and Articled Teacher programmes, followed later by the GTTP and RTTP. There was then the short-lived Fast Track Scheme and again, originally a product of the teacher shortages of the early 2000s, Teach First. All these programmes were characterised by closer links with schools than the higher education programmes of the time.

Howson argues that neither route has solved the teacher supply problems.

The fact is that we need more trainee teachers each year than the total number of those employed by the Royal Navy after the latest defence cuts. Indeed, we recruit each year into teaching somewhere near half the size of the British land army. We do, therefore, need to take this issue of recruitment to the teaching profession seriously, perhaps more seriously than we have done in the past.

Technical and structural issues

There is broad consensus that any route into the teaching profession requires a strong link between the trainee and schools. However, many feel that trainees should be able to train in a real-school setting, a school in which they do not necessarily secure their first post as a qualified teacher; this is important if we are to avoid the risk of natural errors made by trainee teachers unfairly harming their relationships with the students and colleagues in their NQT year and beyond.

At the SSAT discussion dinner, there was universal support for abolishing PGCE fees. If teaching is to compete with other graduate professions, we have to offer on-the-job salaries from the start of training, rather than the start of employment. The table was confident that this would save the government in the long-term by attracting graduates who would stay in the profession.

There is a real concern about the cost of promoting ITT to graduates. A PR company recently won a contract to recruit teachers and spent over £300,000 just on preparing for the bid. For individual schools, these sums are unthinkable, and therefore more needs to be done regionally and nationally to support schools in recruitment.

A possible solution, first discussed by Matthew Hood, was the possibility of teaching internships, with a similar status to financial, law and consultancy internships. Hood commented that he currently accepts university undergraduates as volunteers, and that it is only a small step to move from this to a system where undergraduates would be proud of a teaching internship, and in which schools could vet and then invest in promising candidates. This raised a further issue around the age of recruitment; other professions tend to recruit undergraduates in their first year of study, whereas traditionally PGCE providers have left it later. If we are serious about attracting the best graduates to the profession, the recruitment drive must start far earlier.

Several of those who contributed to the discussion, including some who were former teachers having left the profession in the early stages of their career, argued that we need to think of ITT as more than a nine-month or even one- or two-year course, but as a training period of up to five years. The work of Dylan Wiliam, amongst others, suggests that teachers continue to improve from the training for up to seven years. Furthermore Samantha Twiselton suggests that you can't cover all the necessary content in nine months. What support does the system as a whole offer to teachers between the first and fifth year of study to support this development?

We also know that there is chronic shortage of specialist teachers, felt particularly acutely in some hard-to-reach communities and schools. Children are often being taught by non-specialist teachers. Around one in five maths lessons taught in secondary schools is taught by a non-specialist. Over a five-year period this can have a significant detrimental effect on a young person's performance and attainment. Teachers do not inform parents that their children are being taught by non-specialists. If parents knew about this there might be more pressure to improve the supply pipeline.

An overwhelming feeling from the headteachers present was that it is unrealistic to expect school leaders to take the lead for a system overview of this. With current accountability pressures, schools are (rightly) preoccupied with their own recruitment. System-wide change will need to be directed centrally, or at least regionally.

Messaging and marketing

Matthew Hood, director of the 21 Trust and a practising deputy head in Lancashire, makes the distinction between marketing and advertising; suggesting that the latter is just one part of the former. There has been a lot of debate around the advertising of teaching (not least since the most recent advertising campaign produced by the DfE), but Hood references the 4 Ps of marketing, promotion, price, product and place, arguing that we need a broader vision for marketing the profession.

Rod Bristow, president of Pearson UK, says he was often reminded during his career that it's 'all about the product, stupid'. In other words, unless we get the 'product' of ITT and a career in teaching right, it will always be a hard-sell to graduates. Hood, amongst others, worries that we focus too much on teaching as a moral vocation. When we compare responses to recruitment messages titled 'Ready for the challenge?' with those titled 'Ready to make a difference?', we see the challenge message securing almost double the engagement from candidates. Graduates want a stimulating, challenging and rewarding job. We should not be afraid of being clear that teaching offers this.

Laura McInerney, editor of Schools Week, questions what the 'product' actually is. By the age of 18, students have had significant experience of teaching as a profession. We are better off, McInerney suggests, to think about the product as teaching training, rather than the career itself.

We know that recruitment in regional and coastal areas is a continuing problem, and one the Department is committed to looking into. What more can be done by MATs, federations, and other groups of schools to offer attractive routes and career pathways regionally? James Kempton suggests that the disaggregated school system is not helping.

This led to discussion about engaging people at the right time. It might be that slightly elder graduates, in their late 20s or 30s are a more useful target market for teacher recruitment than recent graduates, as suggested by Will Millard from the Key. Which leads to further questions about the extent of the Government and the system's understanding and analysis of the recruitment pool.

Understanding and analysis

We know that people go into teaching for very different reasons. We need to understand much better what the drivers are; teachers are not a homogeneous group. In terms of marketing, there needs to be better, more nuanced and targeted marketing to press the right buttons and pull the right levers, using incentives with better use of social media. A more scientific targeted approach is required. The recent work of LCKMCo and Pearson (Why teach?, 2015) sheds some light on this, but much greater understanding is needed.

As well as recruiting new teachers, we need to be better at retaining our serving teachers and researching why so many good teachers leave the profession, particularly in the first few years after training. If we retained more there would be less pressure on recruitment.

There was disagreement over whether workload is an issue and acted as a constraint. Some suggest it is punitive, whereas others suggest that hard work and long hours are seen as part and parcel of being professionals. Hard work is not a problem, as long as those engaged in it see a purpose and value in it. Either way, there should be more acknowledgement of the overtime invested by teachers.

Support and value

Dr Robin Bevan, headteacher of a high-performing school in Essex, is keen to point out that there is no cause for a counsel of despair. Teacher shortages are solvable. But you have to invest long term in research and promotion/marketing to meet the challenges.

Furthermore, claims made by the government that it's harder to recruit when the economy is on the up are not necessarily true. Professor Michael Day suggests there is a precedent for recruiting good numbers of teachers in good economic times, such as in the mid-2000s.

There need to be better and more coherent career pathways in the profession. The teaching profession must behave like other leading professions and provide the same opportunities for internships right the way through the career, ensuring high quality professional development.

Above all, there was consensus that the profession must be better at marketing and promoting itself. The profession needs more passionate advocates. The best ambassadors are those from the profession. We need to support and value teachers more, and the best teachers must do more to sell their profession. There are currently some interesting pilot programmes involving around ten to twelve teaching schools, which are actively recruiting sixth formers into the profession and supporting them through their teaching training and preparation. Headteacher and chair of the independent expert group into teacher training, Stephen Munday, advocated this approach.

School leaders and teachers need to show to each other how much they value the work done by others. Positive

messages and affirmation are important ways of ensuring that the profession feels good about itself. Those outside teaching will hold teachers in greater esteem when the messages from those in it are upbeat and celebratory. It is a wonderful job and you are doing it extraordinarily well; a feeling reinterested by Neil Carmichael, chair of the education select committee, who also promise that teacher recruitment and retention would be looked at by the committee in the next Parliament.

Finally, leadership routes in the profession needs to be better: to attract, to inspire and retain teachers. There appears to be less focus now on leadership in schools with the demise of the Leadership College.

Recommendations for future policy

» Scrap PGCE fees, ensuring that all graduate-routes into the profession are fully-funded and salaried.

» Agree a national curriculum for ITT, open to local personalisation and interpretation.

» Publicly fund earlier, and more nuanced, recruitment of undergraduates.

Recommendations for future practice

» Offer local career and leadership progression pathways to attract a more diverse workforce.

» Offer paid internships for current undergraduates.

» Ensure closer links between the best university provision and the best schools-based provision.

» Develop frameworks that supports teacher training over a period of 5 years, minimum.

Recommendations for further research

» Why are undergraduates attracted to teaching in the first place?

» How do teachers choose their routes into the profession?

» Why do young teachers leave the profession?

» What incentives are required to retain teachers in the profession?

Key points

We need to abolish fees for all PGCE courses.

Teaching as a career choice for graduates hit a 15 year low in 2015.

Subject knowledge is less important than having a passion for teaching.

There is a need for NQTs to use the support of experienced staff more systematically. We should explore whether coming to the profession later in people's careers helps retention.

We need to think of ITT as more than a one year course.

We need to build pathways of progression based on support, and focused on personal growth.

More needs to be done to recruit teachers to isolated, coastal and rural schools.

Schools need to build capacity for learning.

The teaching profession too often sells itself short.

NQTs can take on a school and revolutionise it.

We should use teachers to recruit teachers.

The government shouldn't control supply. We need flexibility of pay and conditions.

We need to know what makes good teacher retention.

Is it headteachers, rather than the Department, that lead to workload issues? We need a system overview, not individual schools working on their own.

In the past we've only had quality control (top down) rather than quality assurance (bottom up) when it comes to ITT provision.