

The impact of COVID-19 on initial teacher training

Introduction and background

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, England's school system was facing a considerable recruitment challenge. Although primary initial teacher training (ITT) entry had generally been meeting the numbers needed, secondary ITT recruitment in England had been consistently below target for 7 years in a row.

Several policy initiatives had been introduced to increase recruitment, particularly in shortage subjects. These included bursaries, early career payments, the removal of skills tests and an increase in teachers' starting salary. Although the overall number of secondary trainees has risen over the last few years, the numbers recruited have not been sufficient to meet rising demand in the face of increasing pupil numbers and high teacher leaving rates. Trainee numbers had remained below target in physics, maths, MFL and chemistry.

When schools closed to most pupils in March, ITT placements were curtailed. The DfE allowed ITT providers to make judgements on trainees based on assessments already completed; qualified teacher status (QTS) could be awarded to trainees without them having completed their courses. For trainees who were assessed as not meeting the Teachers' Standards, ITT providers were asked to extend courses and placements in the autumn term to give them an opportunity to do so.

This report from the NFER looks at the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on teacher education and recruitment.

Key points

The impact of the COVID-19 recession

- The COVID-19 lockdown has led to a deep economic recession in the UK, with GDP falling by an unprecedented 22 per cent between Q4 2019 and Q2 2020. Unemployment did not increase in Q2 2020 but it is expected to do so after the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) ends in October 2020 (OBR, 2020). During previous recessions, interest in entering teaching has tended to increase. A review of the literature on the impact of the wider economy on teachers' career decisions found that 'applications rise during a recession because teaching is seen as offering secure employment at a time of rising unemployment' (Hutchings, 2011).
- Data from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) shows that the number of applicants to postgraduate teacher training in England and Wales in 2020 was very similar to the 2 previous years, up until mid-March. Following the lockdown, the number of new applicants increased sharply. The latest data, up to mid-August 2020, shows that the overall number of applicants is 16 per cent higher than at the same time in 2019 and 14 per cent higher than the 2017-19 average.
- A plausible alternative explanation for the increase in new applicants is the substantial increase in teachers' starting

salaries from September 2020. A government proposal for three years of pay uplifts, increasing the starting salary to £30,000 by 2022, was announced in September 2019. This policy was a pledge made by all parties in the December 2019 election. However, the timing of the increase in applicants, from mid-May onwards, strongly suggests that the recession is the main explanation for the applicant surge.

Increase in applicant numbers by age

- UCAS data was used to look at the increase in numbers of applicants and accepted offers between March and August 2020. The data was compared with 2019 figures for the same time period.
- Overall, there were 35 per cent more applications and 36 per cent more acceptances to teacher training than in the same period in 2019. This increase was largely driven by younger students. Amongst those aged 21 and under, there was a rise of 43 per cent in the number of applicants and 54 per cent in the number of accepted offers. Amongst those aged 22, the figures were 36 and 42 per cent respectively. Increases for older students were much



smaller – for example, for those aged 40 and over, there was an increase of 23 per cent in applications and an increase of 22 per cent in accepted offers, compared to the same period in 2019.

- The above figures are in line with research showing that, in a period of economic recession, teaching is likely to be particularly attractive to those who are first entering the job market, such as new graduates. There is also evidence that the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market has been greater for younger workers. Older applicants to teacher training are more likely to be career changers, who may be less vulnerable to labour market uncertainty, particularly while the CJRS (Coronavirus job retention scheme) remains in operation.

Regional variation in accepted offers

- The data shows considerable regional variation in the number of accepted offers, with the largest increases in the West Midlands, London and the North West, and smaller increases in the East of England, North East and South West. This may reflect local variation in economic conditions: London, West Midlands and North West are the regions with the largest increases in unemployment benefit claims in the year to July, and the East of England, South West and North East have had the smallest increases.
- Higher education providers have seen the largest increase in accepted offers, slightly higher than for school-centred ITT (SCITT) and unsalaried School Direct routes. In contrast, the number of accepted offers for salaried School Direct routes is considerably lower in August 2020 compared to August 2019. This is likely to be due to schools reducing their recruitment of new teachers: more existing teachers stayed in post and schools had no additional budget to be able to hire new teachers.
- Teach First – another school-based salaried route, which is not covered by the UCAS data – reported having to turn placed applicants away because not enough schools were willing to employ them.

School placements

- The UCAS data suggests there are likely to be more trainees in 2020-21 (including those who did not pass their course in 2019-20), which means that more school placements are required. However, A NASBTT survey of school-based ITT providers in June 2020 indicated that half of providers had reported partner schools withdrawing from offering placements.
- The NFER asked a representative sample of senior leaders how many placements they had been planning to offer in 2020-21 before COVID-19, and how many they planned to offer in July 2020. Before COVID-19, around two-thirds of primary schools and almost all secondary schools were planning to offer at least some ITT placements. In July, around half of primaries and 4 out of 5 secondaries expected to offer the same placements as they had planned to offer before COVID-19. However, 11 per cent of primary schools were planning to withdraw from offering placements due to COVID-19, and 7 per cent to reduce the number of placements offered. Six per cent of secondary schools were planning to withdraw placements and 11 per cent to reduce their placements. This was

linked to further data revealing schools' concerns about the practicalities of opening in September.

- NFER estimated the net impact of COVID-19 on overall ITT placement capacity by averaging the number of placements offered by each school before COVID-19 and the number offered in July 2020. For primary schools, the total number of placements was 20 per cent lower due to COVID-19 and for secondary schools, it was 7 per cent lower. Schools with the most disadvantaged pupils reported a larger average reduction in capacity due to COVID-19, compared to other schools.

Impact of COVID-19 on recruitment to shortage subjects

- Some shortage subjects, such as mathematics (+26%), MFL (+23%) and chemistry (+17%), have seen healthy increases in the number of accepted offers in August 2020, compared to the level in August 2019. However, the number of accepted offers in physics is only 6 per cent higher in 2020 than in 2019. This could be due to physics graduates having good career options in spite of the labour market uncertainty.
- Estimates of teacher supply needs suggest that despite the increase in applications in 2020-21, the under-recruitment gaps in shortage subjects are unlikely to fully close. Recruitment to ITT is likely to remain below target in some subjects, including physics, chemistry, mathematics, design and technology and MFL, and just below target for computing. By contrast, subjects that met or exceeded their targets in 2019-20 are likely to increase further above the target, including history, geography, English, and PE.

Teacher recruitment and retention

- NFER conducted a nationally representative survey of 1782 teachers in July 2020, asking whether they were considering leaving teaching in the next 12 months. These estimates were compared with data from a similar NFER survey in June 2019. The data shows that the proportion of teachers that are considering leaving in July 2020 was substantially lower than in June 2019, by 15 percentage points for primary and secondary teachers.
- The teacher supply model (TSM) predicted the teacher leaving rate in 2020-21 with the information that was available in summer 2019. NFER data suggests that this is likely to be an over-estimate and that recruitment in mathematics, MFL and chemistry may now meet the need, while recruitment in a majority of subjects, as well as primary, is likely to be substantially higher than need. The biggest estimated gaps between ITT recruitment and projected need are in biology (243% of need) and history (240% of need).

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.nfer.ac.uk/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-initial-teacher-training>