

What did we learn from the [Nuffield Foundation event on the teacher workforce crisis](#)?

Amidst a protracted teacher pay dispute, an [Education Select Committee inquiry on teacher recruitment and retention](#), and hot on the heels of [new data showing 40,000 teachers leaving the profession](#) in one year, the Nuffield Foundation convened researchers, sector leaders and policymakers to debate the issues and next steps for the teacher workforce.

Chaired by [Rt Hon David Laws](#), executive Chairman of the Education Policy Institute, and introduced by [Dr Emily Tanner](#), Programme Head at the Nuffield Foundation, the seminar included four research presentations from Nuffield Foundation grant-holders, followed by insights from three expert panelists and audience discussion. Wide ranging perspectives were brought to bear on the topic within a shared view of urgency and the need for a systemic approach that considers the “whole package” for teachers.

The recording of the event and slides are available [here](#). This note provides a thematic summary of the key points discussed.

1. What is the scale of the teacher workforce challenge?

Participants described the “very serious challenges” of attracting and retaining a high-quality teacher workforce, which has direct implications for student learning and outcomes. The issues aren’t new but have intensified, particularly since the pandemic.

- The target number of initial teacher training (ITT) recruits has risen since the pandemic. The number of ITT enrolments is projected to stand at 48% of the target in 2023/24 for secondary indicating a significant shortfall. By contrast, primary phase ITT recruitment is broadly on target.
- The shortfall is particularly stark in some subjects including Physics, Business Studies, Design & Technology and Computing. Only three subjects are set to meet the ITT targets. The knock-on effect is evident in NFER’s survey data which shows the difficulty of “assembling a field of quality candidates” and recruiting good quality teachers to fill vacancies.
- The main driver of the increased ITT target is the number of teachers leaving the profession. Jack Worth explained that to keep the supply stable, for every six teachers lost, ten need to be recruited. Following a dip during the pandemic, teacher leaving rates are rising again. Vacancies are 59% higher than in 2018/19.
- School leaders take mitigating actions to ensure that classrooms are staffed including recruiting inexperienced, unqualified or low-quality teachers, deploying non-specialists, reducing non-contact time, and school leaders spending more time delivering lessons.
- 45% of schools say that at least some Maths lessons are taught by non-specialists which has implications for student learning, and undermines the [government’s plan to extend participation in Maths to 18 years](#).
- The situation is exacerbated in the most disadvantaged schools which experience higher attrition, higher turnover, higher spending on supply teachers, higher vacancies and greater use of non-specialists to teach Maths and Science.
- Although there are [no obvious patterns in teacher supply according to geography](#), place is important in that some parts of the country have higher vacancy rates, areas with higher prevalence of private schools face greater competition, and place is an important aspects of the ITT market review.

2. What can be done?

Jack Worth categorised the solutions to the workforce crisis into those that address the *financial* and *non-financial* attractiveness of teaching. While the research presentations and panel insights emphasised different aspects, there was consensus that a better understanding of the interaction between the two would support the development of policies and practices.

What can be done to improve the financial attractiveness of teaching?

- Unsurprisingly, given the wider context of industrial action, participants focused on the need to raise pay levels which have declined 12% in real terms since 2010/11.
- A chart, which elicited an audible gasp from the audience, showed England to be an outlier among OECD countries in experiencing the largest decline in average real terms pay since 2010/11 while pay in other countries has either stayed the same or improved.
- Jack Worth argued that just as important as actual pay levels is the competitiveness of teacher pay compared to graduate earnings and average UK earnings, and here the gaps have widened.
- Patrick Roach stated that although teachers are driven by a moral purpose, “pay and conditions do matter” and called for a long-term pay and incentives strategy encompassing the total reward including workload and working hours.
- There was also discussion of targeted financial incentives with evidence showing that targeted bursaries (for example for hard-to-recruit subjects) boost recruitment and early career payments boost retention. However, it was noted that differential pay can instill a sense of unfairness.
- Emma Duchini’s presentation showed that schools that become academies and have greater autonomy see increased pay dispersion, although not higher pay levels overall.
- Pay discrimination according to gender and ethnicity was identified as another aspect of pay that needs to be addressed, discussed further below.

What can be done to improve the non-financial attractiveness of teaching?

REDUCE WORKLOAD AND WORKING HOURS

- Teachers’ working hours have decreased since 2016 but there was strong agreement among participants that further efforts are important for improving recruitment and retention given that teachers in England stand out internationally as reporting lower job satisfaction and higher stress. Patrick Roach, on behalf of NASUWT, called on the government to set targets for fewer working hours.
- Teachers still work more hours, on average, than similar graduates. Also, compared to other graduates, teachers are more likely to report that they usually work in the evening and would prefer to work fewer hours, even for less pay.
- It was noted that workload isn’t just about the number of hours worked. It’s also about the type of work, its intensity and where it takes place. These factors contribute to wellbeing, job satisfaction and the perceived attractiveness of teaching.
- Reference was made to Francis Green’s research on the intensification of work and how it affects the ability to switch off from work – an important factor for wellbeing.
- Drawing on the [Education Support Commission on Teacher Retention](#), Sinead McBrearty noted how growing levels of student poverty and social challenges were exacerbating the pressures of teaching. “Teachers are being asked to be the frontline of social services”.

CONSIDER OPTIONS FOR FLEXIBLE WORKING

- NFER's analysis of the Labour Force Survey showed the stark divide between the rapid increase in homeworking among graduates (44% work mainly from home) and contrasting situation for teachers. The argument was made that we need to compensate for the lack of equivalent flexibility for teachers. There was also a recommendation to combine quick wins such as allowing PPA time from home with developing a workforce strategy that reflects post-pandemic realities of working life.
- However, the panelists challenged this premise somewhat. Patrick Roach noted that teachers do plenty of homeworking, albeit above and beyond a working day at school, and argued that focusing on flexibility risked detracting from the bigger issues of pay, workload and working hours.
- Melanie Renowden pointed out that working from home isn't always desirable. It can be isolating and one of the positives about teaching is that "schools are great at community". The focus should be on the benefits that schools offer.
- There was consensus that there's more to flexibility than working from home and that we need to explore ways to improve the work-life balance of teachers.

CHANGE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

- Two the panelists called explicitly for a review of Ofsted and the accountability system, with Sinead McBrearty making the point that we need an approach that doesn't drive people out of the profession, make people miserable or feel that they have failed.
- John Jerrim's analysis of international PISA data shows that teachers in England experience higher levels of stress caused by accountability (and marking) than most other participating countries.
- School leaders have an important role in mitigating the impact of the accountability system on teachers, by reducing what teachers consider to be 'empty tasks' and prioritising efforts.
- Bernardita Munoz Chereau focused her presentation specifically on 'stuck' schools that receive repeated low Ofsted grades, demonstrating how reputational damage can become a 'slippery slope' with knock-on effects to staffing and pupils. In her study, headteachers had to put in place changes to keep a school viable such as combining classes which added to pressures on teachers. Her recommendations included revising the cycles of inspections to allow schools time to implement changes, removing overall grades and providing more support to 'stuck' schools.

FOCUS ON LEADERSHIP & CULTURE

- Sinead McBrearty stated that "culture is everything" and that since school leaders influence the culture that shapes the experience of teachers, we need to invest in leadership skills and people skills.
- This point was reinforced by Melanie Renowden who called for investment in leadership training so that leaders can deploy the practices that allow "great teaching to happen".
- Analysis of international data by John Jerrim showed that 'supportive leadership' was associated with teachers feeling less stressed at work.
- Emma Duchini reported that when schools become academies, there is often a change in headteacher which becomes an opportunity to effect change.
- John Jerrim's analysis of Teacher Tapp data on work-related anxiety gathered during the pandemic highlighted the elevated pressures on headteachers. During the three lockdown periods between

March 2020 and July 2021, the proportion of headteachers reporting high levels of work-related anxiety was markedly higher than teachers.

- While the focus of the event was unsurprisingly on the challenges, Melanie Renowden noted that constant emphasis on the negatives risks further undermining the profession. She suggested that we should talk more about what's wonderful about teaching, such as the experience of community noted above.

ADDRESS INEQUALITIES AND DISCRIMINATION

- Relating to culture, workload and stress, panelists and audience members noted the gender inequalities in teaching, and that many teachers feel they have to make a choice between being a good parent and being a good teacher because of workload.
- [Education Support's research on the mental health and wellbeing of ethnic minority teachers](#) identified the added burden of discrimination, micro aggression, and tokenism. Patrick Roach added to this that ethnicity pay gaps have widened and job segregation demonstrates structural inequalities. He commended the Education Support research for elevating the voice of teachers.

IMPROVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Melanie Renowden described teacher development as a “vital ingredient in teacher quality and teacher supply” because it improves teacher efficacy, job satisfaction and therefore retention.
- A [new evidence review on teacher recruitment and retention](#) bolsters the case for greater investment in teacher development to drive up teacher quality, particularly in light of the disproportionate benefit of high quality teachers for disadvantaged students.
- Advances have been made in teacher access to “structured, systematic and evidence informed development” but more needs to be done to match the quality of international evidence.
- Linking back to workload, Melanie Renowden noted that the barrier to professional development is time and made the case for further research to ensure that CPD is effective and time is well spent.
- It is important that professional development is school-led and retains the theoretical foundations of teaching.
- In relation to the Early Career Framework, participants noted the need to respond to new graduate norms and to build wellbeing into the framework. The important role of mentors was noted and the consequent need to identify, support, develop, and celebrate them for their contribution to early career teachers.

EXPLORE THE POTENTIAL OF AI

- There was discussion of the potential for AI and large language models (LLM) to make “affordable, scalable impact on teacher workload”. Melanie Renowden said “we need to get practical and find the ways to deploy the tools to save teacher time and improve quality”.
- Patrick Roach cautioned against using AI to find ‘quick and dirty’ solutions to the workload crisis without working with teachers, while a participant queried the evidence base for AI solutions.
- Melanie responded by arguing that we need to “get ahead of developments before they get ahead of us” by working with teachers and trialing possibilities. AI provides a new opportunity for lower cost, scalable solutions which could work at a system level. She called for time-efficient and evidence-based approaches to CPD given that time is “the most precious raw material” for teachers.

- One audience member called for the upskilling of teachers to apply generative AI creatively and to promote critical and creative thinking among young people.

PERSPECTIVES ON NEXT STEPS

Three high-level themes of how to solve the teacher workforce crisis emerged from the event.

- **The need for a systems level approach.** The interaction between the components of pay, workload, stress, culture, development and accountability was evident throughout the presentations and discussion. “We have to take a systemic approach if we’re going to make a difference” (Sinead McBrearty).
- **Addressing challenges without undermining the status of teaching.** “The challenge is how we show urgency and boldness in tackling what we know needs to change without extinguishing the positive messages about the profession.” (Melanie Renowden)
- **Collaboration.** There was a strong call for policymakers to work *with* the profession to co-develop solutions to the recruitment and retention problem.

3. How can research contribute?

One of the aims of the event was to identify areas where further research can inform solutions to the teacher workforce crisis. The following topics emerged from the presentations and discussion.

- Understand more about the aspirations and motivations of prospective and current teachers.
- Understand how social norms are changing, including the career expectations of recent graduates.
- Investigate the concept of wellbeing further and trends for teachers and headteachers post-pandemic.
- Explore the significance of place, particularly in relation to the ITT market review.
- Improve the data about teachers in private schools in order to better understand the supply of teachers and variations geographically.
- Improve the UK evidence base on teacher quality.
- Develop and trial the use of AI in teaching, learning and professional development.

These topics align closely with the funding priorities of the Nuffield Foundation. To find out more about how to apply for funding, follow the links below.

[Research, Development & Analysis Fund | Nuffield Foundation](#)

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