

Supporting and Improving Retention in Initial Teacher Education in Shortage Secondary Subjects: The Starting Out Scheme

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Retention Trends

Recruitment and retention are major issues across initial teacher education (ITE), but are most acutely problematic in the disciplines of physics and chemistry. A recent survey by the Centre for Education and Employment Research (CEER) at the University of Buckingham has indicated that recruiting good physics graduates into teaching has been a persistent problem. Additionally, annual reports from the centralised admissions service, the Graduate Teacher Training Registry (GTTR), indicate that in particular the number of physics applications has fluctuated over the years. After it hit a low of only 535 recruits in 1985, a government bursary scheme produced a temporary increase and the economic recession of the early 1990s boosted applications to their highest level in two decades. However by 1998, after economic recovery, the figure slumped to just 285. Since then government incentives have led to more recruits, with 548 in 2005. Even so, finding physics teachers remains a struggle and alarmingly retention figures reveal a high non completion rate.

The CEER survey revealed the following statistics on physics trainees which demonstrates the extent of the problem.

Number of Universities Surveyed	Entered	Completed	%Deferred/ Dropped Out	% Non Completion
27	281	228	53	18.9

Extract from:
Smithers, A. and Robinson, P. (2006) p.20

The trend of non-completion of the PGCE science course in physics at the University of Worcester (UoW) reflects the national trend and is high. In the years 2006 – 2009, of the 19 students, 6 did not finish the course.

The survey also showed that there were a variety of reasons cited why students left the course. These fell into four broad categories:

- unhappy with physics as it is in schools;
- inability to cope in the classroom;
- transfer to other courses;
- domestic and health reasons.

(Data collection was largely by questionnaire and interviews with tutors.)

Support Mechanisms

Subject support for trainees on a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) is provided largely by mentors in school and tutors in university. Subject tutors may also act as a professional tutor to a mixed subject group. However those who act in a support role are also those who assess competence against the standards required to be met for the award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). This dual role of mentor and assessor quite often means that there is a tendency for the trainee to mask their difficulties to the point when it is too late to remedy a situation that might lead to them withdrawing from the course.

As part of the exit process, tutors do formally discuss with trainees what has led them to leave the course. These conversations could provide valuable feedback but the circumstances under which they are conducted are often emotionally charged and perspectives can be unrepresentative of the truth. It is therefore difficult to be proactive in supporting students in difficulty the tendency is to be reactive when things start to go wrong.

What has been noticeable at UoW is that when looking at the personal profile of those who do not complete there are some striking similarities. If one had to create an 'at risk' profile it would probably be:

- mature
- traditionally educated
- predominantly male
- successful
- highly qualified in their subject.

In conversations with colleagues from other ITE providers, this profile reflects their own experiences of trainees who leave their courses.

The Focus Group

As indicated by Kruger and Casey (2009), focus groups might be considered when you are looking for the range of ideas, opinions or feelings that people have about something. By creating a permissive environment and selecting those with common characteristics, it allows the participants to share perceptions without them having to reach consensus.

In order to gain an insight in to the pressures on *at risk* trainees, a focus group of 5 was set up composed of willing participants, matching the person profile outlined above, with the intention of meeting on three occasions during the year. The group first met in October with a focus question based around perceptions of the pressures that participants might encounter during the course. The participants also agreed to make a taped recording of their discussions. This recording will not be listened to until the third and final meeting has taken place. It is hoped that the group will offer a rich picture on which to draw research conclusions.

By the scheduled time for the second meeting, three members of the focus group had already withdrawn from the course!

Starting Out

Starting Out is a unique pilot programme created by the Learning Skills Network (LSN) and funded by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA). It offers mentoring and support for Maths and Science teachers who are either in training or are in the first two years of their career. 600 places have been funded for London, the West Midlands and East of England regions. For early-career teachers, the programme is specifically designed to give them more confidence in applying their knowledge and skills. For teachers in their PGCE year, it is an opportunity to be mentored by an experienced teacher who is able to give support away from the confines of that available *in house*. It is also an opportunity to gain valuable insights and become involved in teaching communities. The programme provides face-to-face subject mentoring, e-mentoring and networked mentoring. Mentors are selected on the basis of their blend of teaching experience, subject knowledge and mentoring skills.

Starting Out and the Focus Group

In order to make the focus group viable, the remaining members of the group agreed to the suggestion to recruit an additional 3 members and all to sign up to the *Starting Out* scheme. A mentor was allocated by the LSN who facilitated the second focus group meeting in January which was also recorded. The atmosphere was very positive and feedback from the allocated mentor has indicated that all members of the group were subsequently in contact seeking advice or support. A final focus group meeting has been scheduled to coincide with the end of the PGCE course.

Research Findings

The focus group forms part of a research project currently being conducted within the Institute of Education's Centre for Secondary and Post Compulsory education. It is hoped that the findings will be published in a later edition of the Worcester Journal of Learning and Teaching.

References

- Kruger, R.A. & Casey, M.A. (2009). *Focus Groups. A Practical Guide for Applied Research 4th Edition*. London: Sage
- Smithers, A. and Robinson, P. (2006). *Physics in schools and universities: IV Supply and Retention of Teachers*. Buckingham: Carmichael Press