

Smith, Vikki and Husband, Gary (2024) Teacher recruitment and retention challenges in the further education and skills sector: lessons and solutions from international perspectives. Education and Training, 66 (5). pp. 465-476. ISSN 0040-0912

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Teacher recruitment and retention challenges in the further education and skills sector: lessons and solutions from international perspectives
Guest Editorial
Dr Vikki Smith & Dr Gary Husband

The UK further education (FE) and skills sector faces significant challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers, which has profound implications for educational quality and institutional stability. This special issue brings together studies from all over the world and demonstrates similar issues in countries such as Australia, Chile, Germany, Netherlands and Austria. These global challenges stem from various factors, including workload pressures, stagnating wages, limited professional development opportunities, and unclear career progression pathways. Educators across the various global FE and skills sectors often experience heavy workloads (including significant administrative duties, pastoral support, preparation, and teaching contact time), leading to burnout and high turnover rates. Additionally, these studies are linked by how they show that there is a consistent lack of adequate support and remission for professional growth and development, hindering teacher retention. Furthermore, the absence of transparent career advancement routes discourages potentially talented educators from entering and remaining in the profession.

In this introductory editorial, we delve into the complexities of these challenges, drawing comparisons with global contexts and proposing potential remedies for enhancing teacher recruitment and retention across FE and skills providers. International case studies are shared to provide insights in to how others have addressed this prevailing issue. The lessons of others are used to form policy recommendations for addressing these pressing issues in the UK FE and skills sector.

#### Introduction

In the FE and skills sector, the ongoing teacher recruitment and retention crisis presents multifaceted challenges with far-reaching implications for the quality of education and institutional effectiveness. The studies included in this special issue demonstrate that this is a phenomenom being seen globally. And while this collection of syudies draws on a variety of methodological postions and foci, they are linked by the concerns shown for the ongoing retention and recruitment crisis.

Amongst the many concerns raised, not least amongst them is that shortage of qualified teachers can lead to increased workloads for existing staff, often resulting in burnout and diminished morale. This, in turn, compromises the quality of teaching and learning experiences for students, impacting their academic outcomes and overall satisfaction with their educational journey. In the UK, this is further compounded by an uneven training landscape and a lack of consistent definition between the four nations as to what constitutes 'qualified'. The devolvement of this to institutional level within England has led to the removal of opportunities for engagement with higher level teacher education provision often seeing assessor and verifier awards taking primacy as instututions struggle with performative compliance regimes and agendas.

The inability to attract and retain skilled educators hampers innovation and progress within institutions. Qualified teachers bring diverse perspectives, experiences, and teaching methods that enrich the learning environment and foster creativity. Without a steady influx of fresh talent, the active burnout of existing teachers and the failure to retain staff, institutions risk stagnation and may struggle to adapt to evolving educational needs and advancements in pedagogy and

technology. Additionally, the limitations for continuing learning and development opportunities places constraints on career progression, leadership development and the supply of suitable mentors.

These studies repetedly offer insights into how the turnover of teaching staff disrupts continuity and consistency in curriculum delivery, leading to fragmented learning experiences for students. This inconsistency not only undermines the effectiveness of educational programmes but also impedes students' ability to achieve their full potential and develop essential skills for their future endeavours. Short-termism can lead to a lack in institutional memory and become a self perpetuating issue when trying to re-establish a long term sustainable plan for development, learning and teaching and progression.

Moreover, the teacher recruitment and retention crisis exacerbates inequalities within the education system. Marginalised communities and underserved regions are disproportionately affected, as they often struggle to attract teachers compared to more affluent areas. This disparity widens the educational attainment gap and perpetuates social inequities, hindering efforts to promote inclusivity and diversity within the FE and skills sector.

This collection of papers demonstrates that addressing these challenges is paramount to ensure a sustainable and high-quality education system. Investing in comprehensive recruitment strategies, such as targeted outreach programmes and incentives for aspiring educators, can help attract a diverse pool of talent to the sector. Additionally, implementing initiatives to support the professional development and well-being of existing teachers is crucial for enhancing retention rates and maintaining a skilled workforce. By prioritising teacher recruitment and retention efforts, policymakers, educational leaders, and stakeholders can cultivate a robust and resilient FE and skills sector that equips learners with the knowledge, skills, and opportunities they need to thrive in an ever-changing world.

#### Understanding the challenges presented by these papers

Workload pressures, limited professional development opportunities, and unclear career progression pathways are key factors contributing to the teacher recruitment and retention crisis in the global FE and skills sector.

## **Workload pressures**

Studies consistently show that excessive workload, including excessive administrative tasks and class sizes (Smith, 2018), is a significant factor contributing to teacher burnout, attrition and high turnover rates. Teachers in the FE and skills sector often face heavy workloads due to large class sizes, administrative tasks, and the need to cater to diverse student needs. In 2003 Johnson and Birkeland found that workload was a significant predictor of teacher burnout in the FE sector, with heavy workloads leading to increased stress and exhaustion. Two decades on and the situation has seemingly not improved.

High workload levels not only lead to stress and fatigue but also detract from the quality of teaching and learning. Faculty may struggle to dedicate sufficient time and attention to planning engaging lessons, providing personalised support to students, and maintaining a healthy worklife balance. The impact of workload pressures on teacher morale is evident in surveys and studies (e.g., Kyriacou and Coulthard, 2000) that highlight feelings of overwhelm, exhaustion, and disillusionment among educators. These studies further point to this erosion of morale can undermine job satisfaction and contribute to attrition, as teachers seek roles with more manageable expectations.

## Limited professional development opportunities

In 1997, Chalmers and Volet (1997) emphasised the importance of ongoing professional development for teacher motivation and job satisfaction, noting that a lack of opportunities for growth and learning can lead to feelings of stagnation. Twenty years on and the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) (2018) reported that many FE teachers felt professional development opportunities were insufficient, fragmented, and hindered their ability to enhance their teaching practice and subject knowledge. This remains true today: In 2020, Jones & Johnson stressed the importance of ongoing training and support in enhancing teacher effectiveness and job satisfaction. Professional development is essential for teachers to stay current with pedagogical trends, subject knowledge, and instructional strategies. disengagement. The correlation is that insufficient opportunities for professional growth and development hinder teacher retention.

Teachers also lack opportunities for training and upskilling, particularly in areas such as digital literacy, specialised subject knowledge, and teaching methodologies tailored to diverse learners. Without adequate professional development, teachers may feel stagnant in their careers and less equipped to meet the evolving needs of students. This can lead to feelings of frustration and disillusionment, ultimately impacting teacher retention rates. As Husband (2018) demonstrated, limiting professional development and learning opportunities post initial teacher education, significantly impacts on engagement with teaching and learning not only from a career long perspective, but also, crucially for those in teacher education programmes who are not encouraged to see lifelong development as a critical element of practice. A phenomenon approached in several different ways in the papers presented here.

### **Unclear career progression pathways**

The lack of clear pathways deters talented educators from entering the profession and the limited prospects for growth and development impact on whether they then stay in the profession. Brown & Miller (2019) argue for the positive impact of establishing transparent career progression routes and recognition mechanisms to support recruitment to the sector as well as retain existing faculty. McNamara et al. (2019) also note that the lack of career transparency acts as a barrier to attracting and retaining high-quality teachers, as potential candidates see limited prospects for career advancement and development.

Unlike the school sector, where hierarchical structures and promotion tracks are more defined, career pathways in FE and skills are often nebulous. Helyer (2015) highlights that the ambiguity surrounding professional growth and career progression leaves many FE teachers feeling demotivated. The perception of limited opportunities for advancement, or uncertainty about how to progress within their roles can lead to feelings of stagnation and disengagement, prompting talented educators to seek opportunities elsewhere. The cumulative impact of these challenges on teacher morale and institutional stability is significant. All too often this results in high turover, disrupting continuity in teaching and learning, and undermines overall educational quality.

The absence of clear career progression pathways within the FE and skills sector can demotivate educators and hinder their professional advancement. Unlike in the school sector, where hierarchical structures and promotion tracks are more defined, career pathways in FE and skills can be nebulous. As a result, teachers may perceive limited opportunities for career advancement or feel uncertain about how to progress within their roles. This lack of clarity can lead to feelings of stagnation and disengagement, prompting talented educators to seek opportunities elsewhere. Moreover, the absence of transparent career pathways may deter potential candidates from entering the profession, as they perceive limited prospects for growth and development.

The cumulative impact of these challenges on teacher morale and institutional stability is significant and as is explored in depth in this special issue, highlights a crisis of trust in FET/VET teacher professionalism and consequently, autonomy.

Addressing these systemic issues through strategic reforms is seeminglyb crucial for enhancing teacher morale, stability, and educational outcomes. Such change needs to include measures to reduce workload pressures through appropriate staffing levels and administrative support, investing in comprehensive professional development programmes, and creating clear and accessible career progression pathways for educators. By prioritising the wellbeing and professional growth of teachers, institutions can enhance morale, retention rates, and ultimately, the quality and stability of the FE and skills sector. This approach also requires some significant updating in relation to what the nationally recognised role of a lecturer is. Increasinly and for quite some time, FE teachers are working across HE and FE provision (Husband & Jeffrey 2016), are engaged in research and enquiry, are experts in both teaching and pastoral care and have specialisims in multiple areas of specific and additional needs of a diverse student body.

## International responses

The UK is not alone if facing these challenges. Parallels can be found across the globe. In the United States, as identified by Cohen & Brawer in 2008 community colleges face similar challenges similar to UK FE colleges regarding teacher recruitment and retention, including low salaries, heavy workloads, and limited professional development opportunities. Despite the passing of a decade and a half of trying several common strategies such as, offering competitive salaries and benefits packages, providing opportunities for ongoing professional development and advancement, and implementing mentorship programmes to support new teachers (ideas rooted in work by Roueche & Roueche, from as early as1993), little appears to have had a positive impact.

The articles in this special edition tackling teacher recruitment and retention collectively reinforce the multifaceted challenges facing the vocational and technical education sectors. They explore the intersection of technology, leadership, and education, emphasising their roles in enhancing operational efficiency, employee motivation, and socio-economic development. A major issue highlighted is the lack of clear career advancement pathways, which deters talented educators from entering and staying in the profession. For instance, Tully's paper on the staffing crisis in England's further education and training sector identifies key barriers such as inadequate pay, excessive workloads, and poor work-life balance, exacerbated by the absence of transparent career progression routes (Brown & Miller, 2019; Helyer, 2015; McNamara et al, 2019). Nebulous career pathways have a propensity to lead to uncertaintity about advancement prospects (Helyer, 2015); this lack of defined career progression tracks contrasts sharply with the school sector, leading to demotivation and inertia among teachers, and deterring potential candidates who see limited growth opportunities (McNamara et al, 2019). Establishing clear career progression routes and recognition mechanisms, as argued by Brown & Miller (2019), could significantly enhance both recruitment and retention in this sector.

Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector, (comparable to the UK's FE and skills sector), also grapples with teacher shortages and high turnover rates (Wheelahan, 2010). To address these challenges, Australia has implemented initiatives such as targeted recruitment campaigns, financial incentives for teachers in high-demand fields, and partnerships between educational institutions and industry to enhance teacher training and support (Stanwick, 2018). Interestingly, the paper herein by Smith investigates the perceived shortage of VET teachers in Australia. The study scrutinises the evidence for this shortage and examines whether salary levels and qualification requirements are contributing factors. Salaries for VET teachers are

comparable to other educational roles, and qualifications do not appear to be a deterrent. The paper argues that empirical survey work is needed and calls for a broader recognition of the VET sector's importance beyond serving industry needs as current shortages could be explained by and linked to a broader national shortage in the workforce.

Hommel talks to the response Germany has taken to it address its teacher shortage in technical and vocational education and training. The paper captures the views of engineering teacher training students, identifying and comparing vocational interests and characteristics with those of other VET students. The study highlights the importance of understanding vocational interests to effectively recruit for engineering education and address the VET teacher shortage.

Again herein, Bustos and Jariego explore how VET teachers in Chile perceive their prior industry experience and how these perceptions and experiences relate to their motivation and views on teaching. The study highlights significant differences in motivation and teaching perceptions of their research subjects linked to their past industrial careers; they go on to stress the importance of attracting and retaining industry-experienced teachers to improve the VET system in Chile and similar contexts.

Interms of notions of professional identity the paper by Andersson examines how vocational teachers in Sweden connect their previous occupational identities with their new roles as educators. The findings reveal that vocational teachers initiate their identity transformation by recognising their teaching-related competencies and integrating these with their previous professional identities. The study emphasises the ongoing need for vocational teachers to legitimise their competence within the teaching community, which often leads them to draw on their established vocational skills. This in turn links with work on professional trust. In their comparison of the UK and Austria, Donovan and Hautz explore how standards-based educational reforms in the respective countries havee impacted the professional identity and trust of VET teachers. The paper highlights how these reforms create a culture of distrust, affecting teachers' motivation, well-being, and retention. Using trust theory, the study reveals that the standardisation of VET strategies creates tensions that undermine pedagogical autonomy and professional integrity. The authors argue for policy considerations that address trust issues to improve teacher professionalism and organisational effectiveness in the VET sector.

Canada's college system is also facing challenges similar to those in the UK, including aging faculty populations and difficulties attracting and retaining young educators (Bastedo & Bowman, 2010). Strategies employed in Canada include fostering collaborative work environments, promoting work-life balance through flexible scheduling and support services, and investing in leadership development programmes to cultivate future educational leaders (Jones, 2016).

New Zealand's polytechnic sector, akin to the UK's FE colleges, confronts issues such as limited career advancement opportunities and geographic disparities in teacher distribution (Education Counts, 2019) by offering alternative career pathways for educators, such as leadership roles or industry partnerships, and offering incentives for teachers to work in remote or underserved areas (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Singapore, in its response to the teaching crisis, has offered competitive salaries and comprehensive benefits packages to attract and retain top talent in the teaching profession. The financial incentives have included bonuses, housing subsidies, and professional development grants and are used to motivate teachers and recognise their contributions to the education

system. The effectiveness of Singapore's teacher remuneration package and its impact of financial incentives on teacher motivation and retention show how it has served to elevate the status of teaching as a desirable career choice and incentivise experienced educators to remain in the profession (Tan and Lee, 2015).

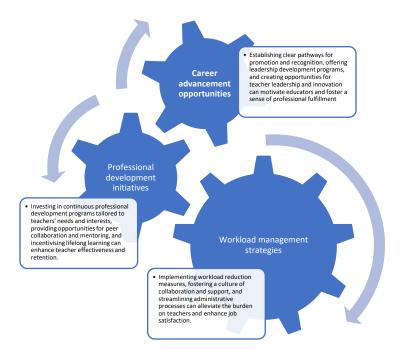
Closer to home, Finland's education system is renowned for its high-quality teaching force and low teacher turnover rates. One contributing factor is Finland's mentor teacher system, where experienced educators provide support and guidance to new teachers. The mentorship programmes facilitate the smooth transition of new teachers into the profession, offering practical advice, emotional support, and opportunities for professional growth (Sahlberg, 2011, Välijärvi et al., 2008). This offers a glimmer of hope and site of some possible solutions and strategies for the UK. However, a systematic lack of investment acts a barrier to many possible ideas being implemented but doesn't prevent flexible solutions such as some of those identified in Netherlands. Here, part-time teaching positions are prevalent, allowing educators to balance their professional responsibilities with personal commitments. Flexible working arrangements, such as reduced hours or telecommuting options, enable teachers to maintain a healthy worklife balance and prevent burnout. This flexibility attracts a diverse pool of candidates to the teaching profession and enhances teacher satisfaction and retention. We have seen some improvements in this space in the UK since Covid enforced many aspects. However, institutions seem to be rolling back from flexible solutions and returning to mandated and fixed on site working.

## Possible solutions and areas for development in sectoral practices

The papers here collectively explore key issues in VET across different countries. They examine perceptions of teacher shortages in Australia, the influence of prior industry experience on Chilean VET teachers' motivations, and the identity development of Swedish vocational teachers. Additionally, the papers investigate the impact of educational reforms on teacher trust and identity in England and Austria, and identify factors influencing the performance of special teachers in VET schools. Overall, these studies highlight the importance of empirical research, the integration of industry experience, and the need for supportive organisational policies to enhance the effectiveness and satisfaction of VET educators.

What is evident is that both organisational support and individual motivation are critical factors that can enhance the effectiveness and satisfaction of teachers in VET settings. Addressing the systemic issues enumerated is crucial for attracting and retaining high-quality educators in the vocational and technical education sectors.

Some of the strategies noted above have proved successful in enhancing teacher recruitment and retention and serve to offer valuable insights for the UK FE and skills sector (Brown & Smith, 2021). By drawing on international examples of successful strategies for enhancing teacher recruitment and retention, such as mentorship programmes, flexible working arrangements, and financial incentives, the UK FE and skills sector can glean valuable insights and adopt innovative approaches to address its own challenges. Implementing these strategies will not only potentially attract and retain high-quality teachers but also, elevate the overall quality and effectiveness of education within the FE and skills sector (Brown & Smith, 2021).



Drawing on the studies presented here and wider empirical work, we can begin to see something of a model of improvement and focus linking career advancement, professional development and workload management. The above diagram presents the underlying working model that underpins the final section of this editorial and enables us to summarise several key consistent points from this body of work and how they might in turn be put int practice.

## Policy implications and recommendations

Addressing teacher recruitment and retention challenges in the UK FE and skills sector (as with all of the international sectors presented in this special issue) requires coordinated efforts among government agencies, educational institutions, and professional organisations. A number of possible focal points are highlighted below.

## Investing in teacher training and development

The importance of investment in teacher training and development is supported by research such as Darling-Hammond (2017), which emphasises the critical role of high-quality professional development in enhancing teacher effectiveness. The ask herein is for an increase funding for initial teacher training (ITT) programmes tailored to the needs of the FE and skills sector, with a focus on practical teaching skills, subject knowledge, and understanding the diverse needs of learners. This needs to be followed by the provision of ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their pedagogical skills, digital literacy, and understanding of industry trends and technological advancements.

#### Competitive remuneration packages

There is a clear correlation between teacher salaries, and recruitment and churn in the system (Ingersoll, 2003), highlighting a clear need for competitive remuneration packages to attract and retain high-quality educators. Salaries and benefits are in urgent need of review to make them more competitive with other sectors, including schools, higher education and industry, so the sector can attract high-quality candidates to the FE and skills profession. Although alien to the UK education sector, this could also invite innovative incentive schemes, such as performance-based bonuses, golden hellos, or loan forgiveness programmes, to reward and retain

experienced educators. However, as highlighted by the study prrsented here from Australia, salaries alone are not enough to solve the issue but, are certainly a contributing factor.

## Inspection versus improvement

The outcomes-driven and accountability agenda, epitomised by inspections and regulatory frameworks, plays a significant role in teacher recruitment and retention. The environment creates immense pressure on educators to meet stringent performance metrics, often at the expense of their professional autonomy and job satisfaction. Such frameworks can turn the educational landscape into a hostile work environment, where the disadvantages, including high stress and workload, outweigh the pay and benefits offered, and when the latter are found wanting it creates a negative feedback loop that reinforces recruitment and retention challenges. The focus on inspection and accountability can exacerbate the problem; in the UK we are seeing growing calls for a more developmental approach, providing ongoing support to educators to help them improve their practice. By shifting the focus from punitive measures to supportive interventions, educators would receive the guidance and resources needed to enhance their teaching practices. This change could improve job satisfaction, reduce turnover, and attract new educators to the field. Moreover, a supportive inspection regime would likely improve the overall quality of education, as teachers feel more secure and valued in their roles, leading to better outcomes for both educators and students (Brown & Miller, 2019). Therefore, rethinking the role of regulatory frameworks and fostering a more supportive, developmental approach is crucial for the sustainability of the further education sector.

## Promotion of career progression pathways

Clear career progression pathways and professional development opportunities are essentials for retaining teachers and fostering job satisfaction (Briscoe et al, 2018). Clear and transparent career progression pathways within the FE and skills sector need to be articulated, including opportunities for advancement, leadership roles, and specialisation in niche areas. Mentorship programmes and leadership development initiatives to support the career growth and professional aspirations of teachers at all career stages are vital and need to be mapped to career trajectories.

## Enhanced work-life balance and wellbeing support

Supportive work environments and wellbeing initiatives are essential in helping to manage workload pressures (Johnson & Cooper, 2020). Interventions such as workload management guidelines, administrative support, and access to counselling services are critical to reduce the pressure and ensure faculty remain in the sector. Flexible working arrangements, including part-time options and remote provision, to accommodate teachers' diverse needs and promote worklife balance need to be seen as a positive element of the organisations propositions to educators, rather than a way for them to manage faculty costs down.

## **Targeted recruitment strategies**

Brown and Lee (2019) explore the effectiveness of targeted recruitment strategies and examine the impact of outreach programmes and diversity initiatives on increasing the diversity of the teaching workforce (aakin to the study presented here undertaken in Germany). Lessons gleaned suggest a role for targeted recruitment campaigns to attract individuals from underrepresented groups, including ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities, and those from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. To support this agenda, work needs to commence whereby the FE and skills sector collaborates with schools, universities, and career guidance services to raise awareness of the FE and skills profession and highlight the rewarding career opportunities it offers.

## Data informed decision making

Research by Huguet et al (2016) highlights the importance of data-informed decision-making in education policy and practice, advocating for the use of data to inform teacher recruitment and retention strategies. The ask then is to collect and analyse data on teacher recruitment, retention, and attrition rates to identify trends, challenges, and areas for improvement within the FE and skills sector. This must go beyond a typical census approach and delve in to the causal reasons for the patterns that emerge. This will ensure that evidence-based insights inform policy decisions and resource allocation, and that interventions are targeted and effective. Indeed, the study in thisn issue from Australia highlights the need for a forensic approach to data and an exploration of several impacting factors in the crisis.

## **Collaborative partnerships**

Collaboration between government agencies, educational institutions, professional organisations, and industry stakeholders are necessary to develop and implement comprehensive strategies for addressing teacher recruitment and retention challenges. Roundtables or working groups, aimed at strengthening the FE and skills workforce, can help to facilitate knowledge exchange, and best practice sharing. The power of collectvive endeavour and collaborative partnerships is highlighted in studies such as Bryk et al (2015), which examine the impact of collective efforts between stakeholders on improving educational outcomes.

By addressing these policy implications and emphasising collaborative efforts between stakeholders, the UK can take significant strides towards addressing teacher recruitment and retention challenges in the FE and skills sector. This collaborative approach is essential for building a sustainable and high-quality education system that meets the diverse needs of learners and prepares them for success in the 21st century workforce

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this special issues has demonstrated that teacher recruitment and retention challenges across the UK FE and skills sector (and globally) are multifaceted and deeply impactful, affecting both the quality of education and institutional stability. The issues stem from factors such as workload pressures, limited professional development opportunities, and unclear career progression pathways. Having reached crisis, they are in need of urgent attention. That said, international examples surface successful initiatives that could provide a clear way forward. They offer valuable insights and actionable recommendations for policymakers, educational leaders, and practitioners striving to build a sustainable and high-quality education workforce. What is evident is that it is through collaborative efforts, investment in teacher training and development, competitive remuneration packages, promotion of career progression pathways, enhanced work-life balance and wellbeing support, targeted recruitment strategies, data-informed decision-making, and collaborative partnerships, that the UK can navigate these challenges and build a resilient and effective FE and skills sector that meets the needs of learners and prepares them for success in the modern world.

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