



The National Association of
School-Based Teacher Trainers

NASBTT Opinion Piece

Emma Hollis

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Teacher Training: ‘We are witnessing a dangerous lowering of the bar to entry’

Training providers are now being asked to justify why they haven't accepted an application to train as a teacher – this flip in expectation renders the application process pointless, writes one ITT sector leader Damian Hinds' speech at the Association of School and College Leaders' (ASCL) conference earlier this month headlining "There are no great schools without great teachers" should have been the rallying call that the sector needed.

The secretary of state's statement that "the quality of teaching matters more than anything else" is absolutely right, yet those of us responsible for teacher training are still coming to terms with Nick Gibb's letter to initial teacher training (ITT) providers saying "criteria will be changed to encourage universities and schools to assess candidates on their potential to meet the Teacher Standards by the end of their training".

The seemingly innocuous difference in the wording of the selection criteria to instruct "that all entrants...have taken part in a rigorous selection process designed to assess their suitability to train to teach" has caused great concern and anxiety amongst the school-centred initial teacher training (Scitt) providers we represent.

While in one sense, this is what providers have always done (no provider is turning away candidates with the potential to be a great teacher); in another, we often see that seemingly small changes in criteria can lead to big consequences for providers. In the past, providers have been asked to justify why they have accepted a candidate on to their course. They are now being asked to justify why they have not. This shift in expectation has been seen as an effective lowering of the bar for entry – something which we are very (very) keen to avoid.

It could, of course, be the case that a candidate is suitable to "train" to teach – with all the support and guidance that this entails – but would not, at the end of the programme, be suitable to enter employment as a teacher. Under the change in criteria, they must still be accepted on to the programme, even where the provider is convinced that they would not "make it" as a teacher in the following year. This is dangerous territory and has rightly caused alarm for our members and other teacher-training providers.

Lack of experience in school

Perhaps of even more concern is the directive that lack of experience can no longer be used as a reason for rejection.

Many providers require a minimum number of days' experience in school before interviewing a candidate. This is as much to protect the candidate and ensure they know what it is they are applying for as it is for the provider's benefit. It has never been a requirement of the Department for Education that candidates have experience before applying for a training programme, but

many providers have used their discretion to set this as an entry requirement. This is based on years of experience and good sense. This right of discretion has now been removed and, under the new criteria, providers are obliged to interview candidates with no school experience, even when their instinct tells them that this is likely to result in poor outcomes down the line.

We need to be clear on the implications of these changes. If Scitts receive a poor Ofsted inspection, their capacity to train at all could be taken away altogether. If they lower their standards, schools and individuals will be asking, “Why are you putting that person through?” We are committed to working with the Department for Education on a solution but we are concerned. Are ITT providers trusted to make a decision on whether or not to accept a candidate? If not, what is the point in us being there? Our Scitts are led by experienced teacher educators – we know what we are doing.

Of course, these changes followed hot on the heels of the latest figures on teacher-training applications, which showed numbers going down from 19,330 in December 2016 to 12,820 in 2017 – and they were seen by some as a knee-jerk reaction to these figures because what these figures have done is thrust the issue of teacher recruitment into the mainstream public eye.

Yet we must acknowledge that the drop in teacher-training applications is a complex issue. Perceptions of the teaching profession are at an all-time low – there is a negative reputation of what it is actually like to be a teacher – and, being frank, the attention on and challenge being given to Scitts, university-based teacher-training providers or indeed teaching apprenticeships will not help to drive up applications.

Plummeting morale, pay and budgetary restraints, stress and challenging working conditions are all having an impact on teachers; many are being driven out of the profession, and now we are seeing that fewer are choosing to enter it in the first place. This needs to change – and while we do need to tackle the immediate challenges, we also have to make sure teaching once again becomes an attractive career option.

Emma Hollis is Executive Director of the National Association of School-Based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT).

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NASBTT is a registered charity committed to promoting high-quality schools-led programmes of training, education and professional development of teachers.

NASBTT represents the interests of schools-led teacher training provision in relation to the development and implementation of national policy developments. Our members include SCITT providers, School Direct Lead Schools, Teaching Schools, HEIs as well as a range of other organisations involved in the education and professional development of teachers. We have 195 members representing almost 7,000 individual trainees.

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