

Initial teacher training (ITT) market review

Response from the British Academy

August 2021

Introduction

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. It is an independent fellowship of world-leading scholars and researchers; a funding body for research, nationally and internationally; and a forum for debate and engagement.

The humanities and social sciences and those who study them enrich and deepen our understanding of the world around us. Since its creation, the British Academy has celebrated these subjects and demonstrated their contribution to the understanding of humanity, economies and societies. We bring both the expertise of our fellowship and insights from these disciplines to bear on public policy issues.

This response draws largely on work which the British Academy carried out with the Royal Society in 2017 and 2018, culminating in the report *Harnessing Educational Research*.

The Academy has provided responses to questions 11, 12, 13, 16, 24 and 26.

Quality requirements. The case for change

11. Which of the themes set out in the report do you particularly recognise as key area(s) where there is an opportunity to further increase the quality of ITT? You may choose as many themes as apply.

a. Consistency across partnerships and between providers in the content and quality of the training curriculum

b. Rigorous sequencing of the training curriculum

c. Alignment between the taught curriculum and training environments, in particular teaching placement schools

d. Sufficient opportunities for trainees to benefit from highly focused practice of, and feedback on, essential components of the curriculum

e. High-quality mentoring to ensure that mentors both know and understand the training curriculum and have a sufficient level of influence over the progress of trainees

f. Clarity about the way in which the market operates for potential trainees

g. A supply of enough high-quality placements with the capacity to fully support the delivery of the trainee curriculum

h. None of the above

Please provide any additional details to explain your selections.

In light of the recommendations in the review, the British Academy wishes to highlight challenges a) and g).

While it is important to ensure a degree of consistency in content and quality of training, it is important to not sacrifice enhancements in provision that come from the autonomy of providers to innovate and play to their own strengths. Providers are rightly concerned that the recommendations as formulated in the review appear to be overly prescriptive on content to the point where the aim of consistency may, in practice, degrade into uniformity as providers try to meet the demands of the quality requirements.

In particular, the primacy on the relatively new and largely untested Core Content Framework is a risky approach to ensuring conformity, one which may sacrifice overall quality of provision by inhibiting provider autonomy to be creative and innovative as well as limiting the time and space to provide other essential parts of quality teacher training, such as subject-specific content, multidisciplinary insights from research, and developing skills to adapt teaching to different social contexts.

The British Academy recommends that the DfE **adopt a less prescriptive tone in the recommendations** by emphasising the role of providers in choosing a range of both generic and specific content, and a strong evidence base on which all content is provided. The Academy also recommends **delaying the focus on the Core Content Framework** so that it has time to be better embedded and updated with reference to a broader and deeper body of relevant research.

When it comes to supply of high-quality placements, we wish to highlight the potential negative impact that the recommendations may have on this challenge, particularly if they are implemented at the speed suggested. The review has not provided a compelling case for a major overhaul of the ITT system, not least because of the evidence from Ofsted that the current system is already strong and not necessarily performing as poorly as the Department for Education's desire for reform suggests.¹

The British Academy is concerned that pushing through major reforms at such a pace in what is an already uniquely challenging time for training providers and the education sector more widely could lead to the market exit of key existing providers of high-quality teacher training. Moreover, the additional disruption caused by the proposed reaccreditation process and the overall direction of travel towards a more centralised and prescriptive ITT system could lead to a fall in both the recruitment and the retention of teachers.

The Academy recommends that the DfE takes account of the feedback from the sector on the disruptive effect of these reforms and the high probability that they will lead to the exit of some

important providers. The most obvious option is for DfE to **extend the timeframe for implementation** to allow providers sufficient time to embed existing reforms and prepare for the most recent proposed changes, with further opportunity for consultation and dialogue built into the timetable.

12. Do you think that there are any other key areas for improvement in the ITT system that are not included in the above list?

The British Academy wishes to highlight the key challenge of ensuring the consistent and effective use of the most relevant and up-to-date research and evidence in the delivery of teacher training. This is particularly challenging in the current mixed market of ITT provision, where a large proportion of provision takes place outside of a higher education setting. It is a crucial challenge that we highlighted in our major report on the educational research ecosystem, *Harnessing Educational Research*, which we published with the Royal Society in 2018².

There is strong evidence that ‘research-rich’ school and college environments underpin the world’s high performing education systems, and that teachers and teacher educators must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to engage with research for these systems to thrive³. Therefore, initial teacher training must provide the space for meaningful engagement with research and enquiry if the UK is to develop and sustain high-quality education provision.

The 2015 Carter Review rightly emphasised a move away from the ‘craft’ model of teaching towards trainees who are research-literate consumers of evidence-based research.⁴ The market review reiterated the need for teachers ‘to be able to understand and respond to good quality evidence as they move through their careers’, though we are concerned that the discussion of the types of evidence and research skills needed is limited and their importance in ITT underestimated.

There are particular concerns in the current mixed-market system that not all school-centred providers are fully equipped to make their courses sufficiently research-informed. McNamara *et al* (2017) cautioned that some school-led training schemes still work on a limited craft model of teaching and are, therefore, ill-equipped to provide the necessary engagement with the sources of evidence and research expertise required for the teaching profession.⁵

Our review of the educational research ecosystem with the Royal Society recommended for teachers on all training routes to get the ‘support to find sources of evidence and develop the skills needed to make judgements on the validity and reliability of the research’.⁶ Not only is this a problem for the system as it currently stands, but it is likely to be an even greater challenge under the further reformed system proposed in the recommendations of the market review. McNamara *et al* (2017) suggest the refocus of ITT provision on the primary core curriculum has led to ‘difficulties for many ITT providers, particularly in the university sector, in combining the required focuses on the primary school curriculum and the changing raft of initiatives for education in schools, with the depth, breadth and criticality of knowledge traditionally valued and implemented in the ITT curriculum’⁷. The proposed reforms, which place an even greater focus on the core curriculum, could further damage the sector’s ability to provide the right depth and breadth of research knowledge and skills. The perceived threat to academic freedom and autonomy may also move an even greater proportion of training out of the higher education sector and into school-based provision that is not yet fully equipped to provide the necessary engagement with research.

13. If you think that there are alternative approaches to addressing these challenges, please specify what these are.

In addressing the challenge of engagement with research, we recommend the Department for Education **ensure that the importance of research-informed practice is more clearly recognised within the professional standards for teachers** and in the requirements for initial teacher education, and also for Ofsted to **put clear frameworks in place that encourage school and college leadership to develop a culture of critical evaluation and research-informed practice.**⁸

Quality requirements for ITT providers

Curriculum

16. Please provide any comments you have on any of the other curriculum requirements (excluding those requirements relating to intensive practice placements and minimum time allocations covered above), referencing by number any of the specific requirements included in the Quality Requirements that you wish to comment on

The primacy of the Core Content Framework in the proposed approach to ITT curriculum raises several concerns.

While we understand that the DfE has sought to reassure the sector that there remains suitable flexibility and breadth in the proposed approach, the articulation of the review and its recommendations remain problematic for a number of reasons that have hitherto not been adequately addressed by the Department.

While it may not have been the intention of the review or of the DfE, the fact that providers must put the integration of the entirety of the Core Content Framework first, with further content deemed ‘appropriate’ to sit ‘alongside’ it, suggests to providers that meeting the quality requirements is largely based on the integration of the CCF and that other aspects are secondary and less important. Providers may find themselves under pressure to limit subject-specific content and other key aspects of training that do not fit within the content of the CCF in an attempt to meet the new quality requirements.

The Core Content Framework is still relatively new and has not yet proven itself as adequate, and, at the very least, **should be allowed time to be properly embedded** before rushing to put it at the heart of ITT.

The Core Content Framework has also drawn criticism from experts, based on a significant body of research and evidence.⁹ One key concern is that the CCF is too narrow and is underpinned by a very limited selection of research and evidence. The Academy are particularly concerned that the CCF lacks consideration of research on the importance of social and cultural contexts, and the role of environments both inside and outside of the school, in the determination of learning outcomes.¹⁰ Given the marked social and place-based inequalities in educational outcomes across the country, which research suggests will be exacerbated by the long-term effects of the pandemic¹¹, and the government’s policy priorities around levelling-up, it seems problematic to relegate such important research to the periphery of teacher training and fail to ensure that training and support is tailored to the variable contexts of different schools in different places. **The British Academy recommends that a broader and**

deeper research base should be used to underpin the CCF and to support all aspects of teacher training.

Accreditation

24. Please provide any comments you have on the proposed approach to accreditation and re-accreditation.

The British Academy is concerned that the proposed approach will inadvertently lead to the market exit of some well-established ITT providers within the higher education sector, threatening the supply of teachers in critical subjects like English and Modern Foreign Languages. Language learning continues to be in decline¹² and MFL teachers were recently placed on the shortage occupations list. The perceived threat to institutional autonomy and the significant hurdle of the short timeframe for implementation have created an unacceptable risk to ongoing provision which outweighs any additional benefits that could be achieved by a rushed implementation of the new accreditation process.

While we acknowledge the Department's desire to maintain momentum in its reform agenda, we have not seen any strong evidence to suggest the current ITT system is significantly underperforming and in need of immediate intervention. As of June 2020, all ITE age-phase partnerships were ranked either 'outstanding' or 'good' by Ofsted.¹³ Giving greater time to communicate, consult and work with the sector will ensure a more successful implementation, prevent unnecessary conflict and upheaval, and decrease the risk of market exit and disruption to the supply of new teachers.

The Academy urges the DfE to **reconsider the timeframe for implementation and give providers longer to provide feedback and take necessary steps to prepare for reform.**

26. Please provide any comments you have on a) the proposed target of September 2023 for first delivery of the Quality Requirements and b) DfE's proposed timeline as set out above.

As set out in our response to question 20, the British Academy believes the timeframe is not only too ambitious but also risks unintended negative consequences such as the market exit of key providers and disruption to the supply of new teachers. It is difficult to gauge the longer-term impact on the sector, but it is safe to assume that poor implementation will damage the reputation of the teaching profession, and this could have a knock-on effect of discouraging good quality candidates from entering the profession.

There seems no strong reason to be rushing the delivery of the Quality Requirements and re-accreditation, so we urge the DfE to **lengthen the timeline by at least one year and include further opportunities for communication, consultation and feedback.**

A possible model to follow is the implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework in higher education. While there remains disagreement over the policy itself and in its effectiveness at improving teaching quality, most agree that its implementation was improved by the DfE undertaking a comprehensive consultation over a longer period, during which considerable changes were made in advance of implementation based on sector feedback. Time was taken to improve the way the policy was communicated, easing tensions and reassuring the sector about similar concerns such as loss of autonomy and administrative burden. The timeline for implementation was adapted and included a 'pilot' year, and additional proposals, such as subject-level assessment, were not implemented

immediately, ensuring that providers were not overburdened by the scale of administrative changes required to meet the criteria. A 'lessons learned' evaluation exercise was also built in, and further revisions have since been made. The core components of time, communication and evaluation were more adequately considered and finely balanced in this approach compared with the approach presented for ITT reform. Policy success will be difficult without a rethinking and rebalancing of these core components.