

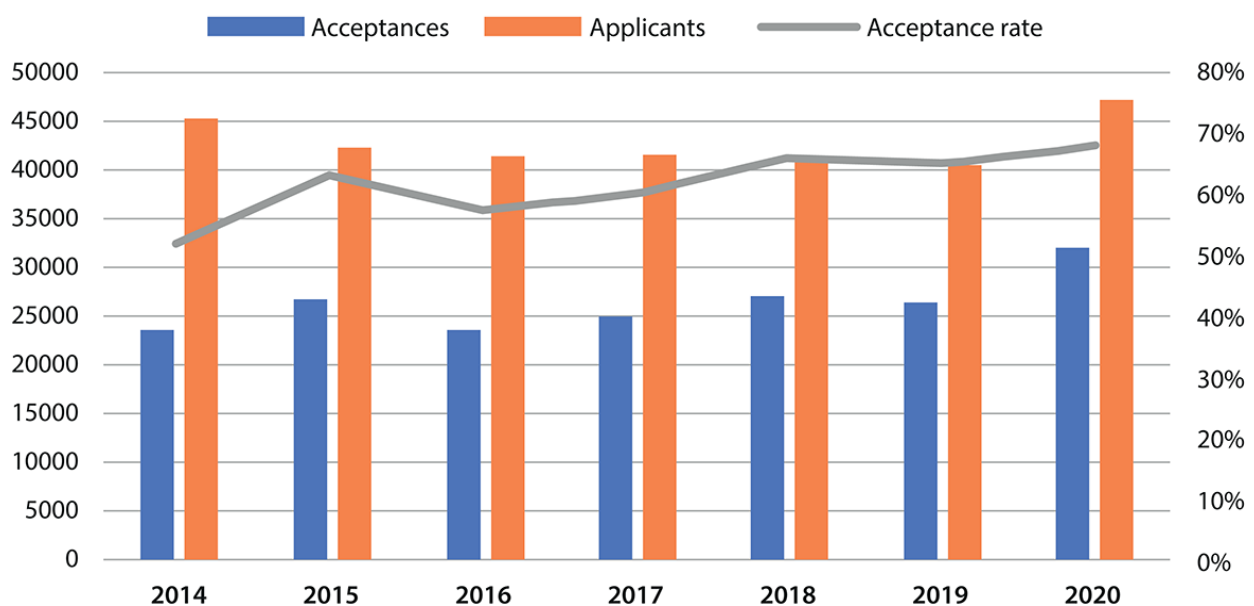
Where have we gone wrong in our battle against teacher shortages?

Beng Huat See from the Durham Evidence Centre for Education, Durham University, looks at the chronic issue of teachers shortages and how to fix it

The issue of teacher shortages is a global one. According to the recent Eurydice report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2021), 35 of the 43 education systems across Europe reported a shortage of teachers.

One reason the problem hasn't been solved is perhaps the issue has been misdiagnosed, leading to inappropriate solutions.

Our research combines the analysis of policy decisions, longitudinal time series analysis of data on teacher numbers and teacher vacancies, and a national survey of undergraduates and robust evaluations of policy interventions.



Source: UCAS Teacher Training statistics – applicants and acceptances by end of cycle 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020. *Acceptance figures include those who have accepted their conditional offers.

Political decisions and their unintended impact on teacher supply

One of the strongest influencing factors is government policies, which can alter teacher demand and supply quickly by changing mandatory class sizes, pupil:teacher ratios, entry requirements for teacher training, adjusting the number of training places available, and reform the way schools are funded.

Government can have an impact on teacher supply by restricting the number of people that can be trained. Policy reforms in other areas, such as the extension of the training and education leaving age to 18, the reform in the General Certificate of Education (GCSE) science curriculum requiring students to take two instead of one science subjects have led to an increase in the demand for teachers. Such policies are putting pressure on an already limited pool from which teachers can be drawn.

The teacher shortages are not due to a lack of interest in teaching, as data shows between 2014 and 2021 under 70% of applicants to teacher training were accepted, and from 2014 to 2017, the period when concerns of a teacher supply crisis were highest, under 60% of applicants were successful. In 2020, over 15,000 applicants were not offered a place, suggesting that there is no lack of interest in teaching.

How do we attract more people into teaching?

Given the limited number of graduates leaving university, policies to get more people into teaching might do well to not focus on those who would go into teaching anyway, but on those who are interested in teaching but have decided against it.

Policies should be aimed at recruiting shortage subjects like maths, physics and chemistry. Potential teachers are more likely to report being motivated by having a chance to share their knowledge and other social utility values compared to their peers, and are less concerned with job status, career prospects and pay.

Our study shows that for those who want to be teachers, the majority would have already made their decision by the time they enter university. This influences their choice of major subject at university, which in turn, drives their career trajectory.

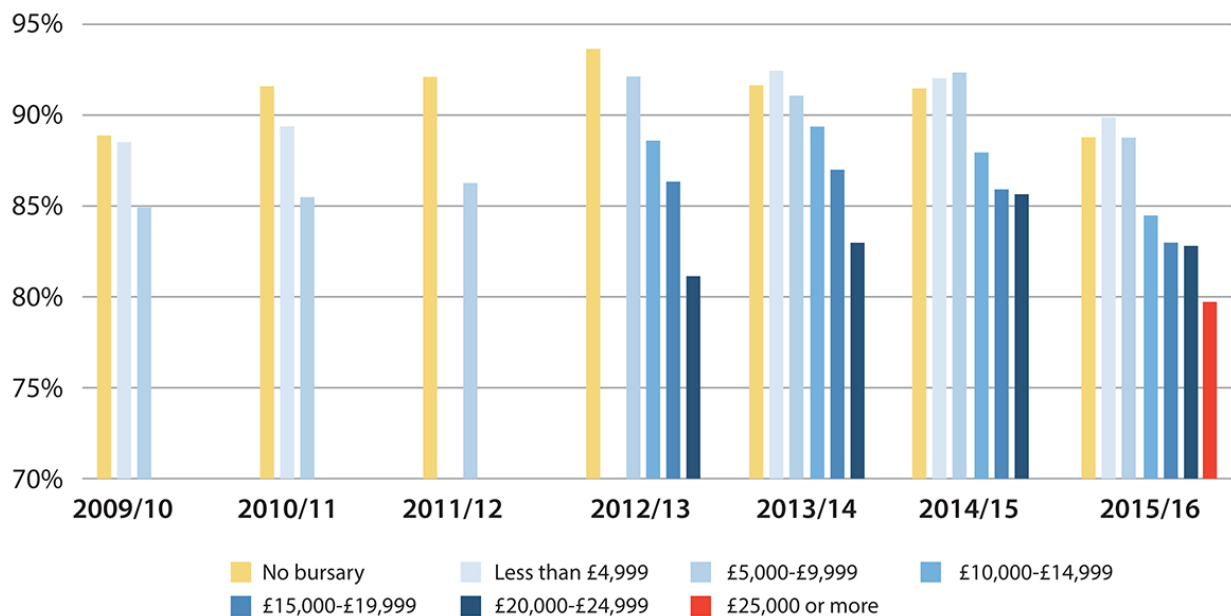
Is money an attractor?

Money is an attractor, but its impact is more complex. There is no evidence that offering monetary incentives for shortage subjects would encourage more people to teach these subjects, nor did it encourage people to switch to teach these subjects. To persuade teachers to teach in challenging schools, we would need to pay them substantially more to compensate for factors that might make the schools less attractive.

The new bonus incentives suggested in England for STEM teachers in disadvantaged areas is unlikely to have the desired impact, as they usually attract those already interested in teaching, but would not encourage those who have not considered teaching to change their career decisions.

Any impact would be short-term. DfE's analysis shows that those who received the highest awards (i.e. those in STEM subjects) are least likely to take up a teaching post after training.

In terms of retention, offering higher wages has mixed results. For example, they are effective in retaining inexperienced teachers, or those earning under a certain amount. They are only effective if the incentive is perceived as adequate. Where incentives encourage teachers to stay in high priority areas, the effect is only short term. Perhaps, it is not the financial incentives, but the conditions attached to them that had an effect on retention, and that monetary inducements alone cannot compensate for the poor working conditions, school leadership and school climate.



<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/teachers-analysis-compendium-4>

Working conditions matter

School working environment is particularly important. Teachers are willing to work long hours and for lower pay if the working environment is supportive. Teachers are not naïve – they are aware that teaching is hard work and most certainly did not go into teaching for the money. But what drives them out is not the low pay, but the perceived lack of leadership support. Correlational studies show strong links between school leadership, administrative support and teachers' decision to leave.

The accountability culture of the profession also has a negative impact on teachers' retention. In countries that experienced government initiated and tightly controlled reform, teachers reported the greatest negative impact on their work lives. The effect is stronger especially in low-performance schools where penalties are imposed based on student performance in high-stakes assessments and where teachers have little autonomy in the classroom.

What can be done to improve teacher recruitment and retention?

Focus on attracting those who have considered teaching but have decided against it. For this group, it is pay, job status, job satisfaction, career prospects and subject interest that seem to be more important to them.

Policy decisions to improve the quality of teaching have to be carefully balanced with the numbers to be trained.

Improve school working environment and encourage a supportive and collegial leadership. If the working conditions are favourable, monetary inducements are not necessary.

More creative approaches to retention could be explored. For example, rewarding long-serving staff by offering sabbaticals for teachers after a certain number of years in post, to allow them to travel, conduct their own research or pursue further study.

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