

Understanding and mitigating the impact of Covid-19 disruption on trainee and early career teachers in secondary schools

Findings and recommendations to address teacher quality and enable retention

Overarching finding

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the two cohorts who trained in years 2019 – 2021. Trainees, even within the same cohort, have experienced their training in different ways, largely dependent on their school placements, subject and personal circumstances.

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings

1. ECTs have reported some positive impacts of training during the pandemic, such as the use of IT to support teaching and learning and a heightened sense of professional community. Staff also noted the resilience of trainees and ECTs during this period.
2. For ECTs, there is a disconnect between the need for personalised support in response to their varied training experience and the prescribed content of induction programmes.
3. The teacher training experience during the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in reduced opportunities for pastoral practice, limited parental engagement and a reduced involvement with extracurricular activities.

Recommendations to address teacher quality and enable retention

- Schools should** continue to embrace the unique skills and experiences of ECTs in the planning and delivery of the curriculum. This can help develop and sustain teacher resilience, teacher agency, a sense of self-efficacy and will strengthen the professional identity of ECTs.
- Bespoke professional** development for ECTs is needed to address the highly variable impact of COVID-19 on teacher training and induction.
- Opportunities for** subject specific CPD are also vital for teacher self-efficacy and, potentially, for teacher retention and should be actively sought.
- ECTs should** be given the opportunity and time to engage in a range of pastoral activities both in and beyond the school to further develop pastoral skills.
- ECTs should** be encouraged to participate fully in all aspects of school life and structured support should be provided for interactions with parents and other stakeholders.

OTHER FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings	Recommendations to address teacher quality and enable retention
4. The wellbeing of ECTs is impacted by the pressures of the ECF, exacerbated by varied training experiences.	Nurturing and supporting ECT wellbeing in the workplace needs to be central to their professional development experience. Additional wellbeing support should take the form of changes to school systems that substantively reduce workloads, rather than palliative approaches to stress reduction.
5. Schools have experienced time and resource limitations in providing mentoring for trainees and ECT induction simultaneously.	ECT and mentor workload should be closely monitored by schools in order to provide adequate time and space for ECT professional development and reflection. This information should be considered by policymakers.
6. The growth and retention of ECTs benefits from the provision of formal and informal support, including through collaboration with other professionals and/or ECTs and in different learning and/or social spaces.	Support and collaboration in different learning and/or social spaces should be sought for ECTs. This could potentially foster professional growth and may encourage retention.
7. Opportunities for reflection, which are not linked to assessment, have a positive impact on ECTs' identity formation, professional experiences and growth.	ECTs should be offered regular, supported reflection, that is not linked to assessment. Where possible, this should include ongoing engagement with training providers for ECTs and their mentors. Opportunities for ECTs to reflect together across subjects and schools should be actively sought.
8. ECTs have found engagement with research empowering but have been frustrated by induction material that is repetitive of their training experience.	ECTs should be encouraged to engage critically with a broad range of education research and have opportunities to discuss their reading and the interactions of theory (and theorists) with practitioners.
9. The experience of training during the Covid-19 pandemic has reduced opportunities for ECTs to work with a diverse range of students.	ECTs should be provided with supported experience of working in ethnically, educationally and socially diverse contexts where they can further develop skills of teaching for inclusion.
10. The experience of training during the Covid-19 pandemic has served to broaden perspectives and has led to innovative practice from ECTs (e.g. including addressing global issues) in their teaching.	Schools should continue to embrace the unique skills and experiences of ECTs in the planning and delivery of the curriculum, further developing self-efficacy and teacher identity by building on the innovative practices adopted by ECTs during the pandemic.
11. The experience of training during the Covid-19 pandemic was positive in terms of social justice and equity, with a collective spirit emerging across teaching staff irrespective of position and years of service.	Schools should continue to embrace opportunities for whole staff collaborative working, allowing ECTs to learn with and from a broad range of teaching and non-teaching staff. Schools should actively seek opportunities for ECTs to share their experiences and expertise with a wide range of teaching and non-teaching staff. Schools should seek opportunities for ECTs to develop leadership skills through appropriate tasks, responsibilities and initiatives.
12. Experience and skills gained from previous careers outside of teaching proved beneficial for ECTs in the context of pandemic-related uncertainty and in their ongoing professional development.	Greater recognition should be given to the role of transferable skills and experience acquired before teacher training in developing new teachers' professional practice

Context

Covid-19 has led to huge disruptions to the education system, not just for students and teachers, but for those training to join the profession. Trainees learning to teach in UK secondary schools in both the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years experienced very challenging training contexts, and there is a real risk that they will have insufficient expertise and could rapidly leave the profession as a result.

In turn, this potential lack of expertise and high attrition could seriously impact on the educational outcomes of young people who have already faced significant disadvantage through school closures and ongoing Covid-19-related disruption. For these reasons,



understanding how teacher development has been impacted by Covid-19, and how early career teachers (ECTs) can be best supported in response, is a public policy priority.

The research

This 18-month research project began in April 2021 and responds directly to the challenge of understanding how teacher development has been impacted by Covid-19, and how early career teachers (ECTs) can be best supported in response to the pandemic. Through surveys and interviews with trainees, ECTs, school leaders and initial teacher education (ITE) staff based in both schools and university over a two-year period, the project has elicited a rich understanding of the impacts of Covid-19 on teacher quality and retention.

In 2021, interim findings generated from the first phase of the project were published in a [briefing for policymakers](#). In addition, the project team published a [Guide for Schools Supporting Early Career Teachers](#).

This document outlines findings from the research and provides practical recommendations for policymakers, school leaders and ITE providers across the UK. While the research is focused on those who complete the postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE), the outcomes have relevance for all teacher education routes, including undergraduate pathways.

The questions guiding the research

1. How has the Covid-19 pandemic created challenges and opportunities for secondary trainee teachers and ECTs to develop teacher quality?
2. How might the Covid-19 pandemic affect the retention of secondary trainee teachers and ECTs, especially those teaching subjects which have persistent shortages of teachers?
3. What changes to practice should be highlighted to trainees, teachers, schools and training providers to mitigate the negative effects of Covid-19 on teacher quality and retention?

Method and analysis

The research project adopted a mixed methods approach. Quantitative data gathered through two separate questionnaires distributed to teachers who completed their training at King's College London during the Covid period (2019-2020 and 2020-2021) and to senior school leaders from the university's network of schools.

Qualitative data was gathered through 112 semi-structured interviews (each lasting 30-50 minutes) with trainee teachers, ITE school mentors and senior leaders, and

university based ITE staff. The project also drew on data from a pilot study comprising interviews with trainee secondary school teacher participants, conducted at three points during the 2020–2021 academic year.

Analysis of the data generated provisional findings that were shared during a three month-long consultation period, which included an online survey designed to gather practitioner responses to the findings. Responses were also encouraged and gathered via email and twitter so that the sector had a range of ways to respond to the research, enabling responses from staff and trainees in schools, universities and other training centres. Participating practitioners were also invited to an online workshop in March 2021 to share their perspectives and reflections on the provisional findings. All the engagements with the provisional findings informed the final findings and recommendations.

In the following section, we outline the project’s overarching finding and detail the three key findings and our recommendations. Further findings and recommendations are detailed in the summary table at the start of this document.

Project findings and recommendations

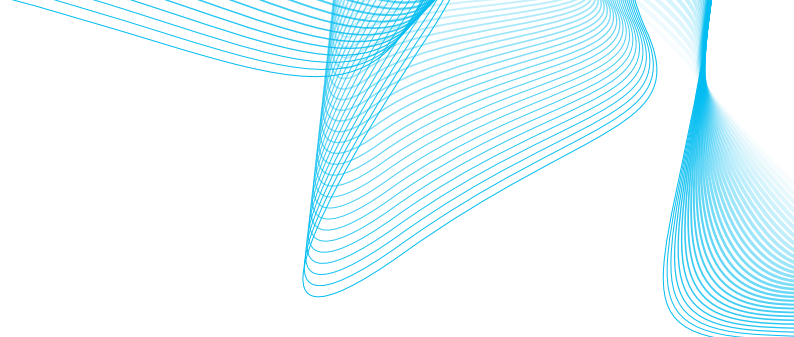
Overarching finding

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the two cohorts who trained in years 2019 – 2021. Trainees, even within the same cohort, have experienced their training in different ways, largely dependent on their school placements, subject and personal circumstances.

The two cohorts of teachers who trained during the Covid-19 pandemic had markedly different experiences. The first cohort, who completed their training between 2019 and 2020, experienced a relatively “normal” period between September 2019 and the end of February 2020. From March 2020, with the onset of lockdowns in England, there was a rapid and abrupt shift to trainees working completely online. These trainees were unable to return to their school placements and were unable to attend in-person interviews for teaching posts. Instead, job interviews were held online, with implications for both the applicants and the schools employing them.

The second cohort, who completed their training between 2020 and 2021, embarked on their programme of study in the middle of the pandemic and as such, moved between periods of in-school placement and online teaching. Although these trainees were able to complete substantive school placements, they had a disrupted rhythm and were restricted in terms of movement around the classroom and school site, curtailing access to equipment and resources. For this cohort, the university aspect of their training was undertaken, in the vast majority of cases, almost completely online (eg via online seminars, lectures, facilitated discussions in breakout rooms).

This distinction between cohorts is important from a policy perspective. While those who trained in 2020–21 will be supported by the new Early Career Framework (ECF) for their first two years in the classroom, those who trained in 2019–20 and completed



their first year in 2020-21 are not part of the ECF induction programme. There remains no recommended provision to address the two years of sustained disruption that current ECTs have experienced.

Even within cohorts, there was variability in the training experience. Different schools responded to Covid-19 in different ways, including in their use of “bubbles”, the restriction of movement around the school site and their use of online teaching.

In addition, the pandemic and associated responses also affected different subjects in different ways. Those subjects that make greater use of practical work (for example science, art, drama and PE (Physical Education)) and fieldwork (for example geography) have had to adapt their teaching strategies more extensively.

It is important to note that the experience of training to teach during Covid-19 has not been wholly negative for trainees and the flexibility and resilience that the situation has necessitated may even impact positively on professional development and a desire to remain in the profession.

Key findings and recommendations

1. ECTs have reported some positive impacts of training during the pandemic, such as the use of IT to support teaching and learning and a heightened sense of professional community. Staff also noted the resilience of trainees and ECTs during this period.

A central finding from the research has been the identification of positive aspects of the experience of training to teach during Covid-19. Respondents reported that there were opportunities to showcase and further develop IT and online working skills. ECTs commented that their technological expertise and willingness to adapt to new ways of working has been embraced by schools. During the pandemic, trainee teachers were frequently able to provide their placement schools with support to implement online teaching and learning strategies, with this having a positive impact on trainees’ self-efficacy and confidence. Remote learning was also reported to aid inclusion in some instances, allowing trainees and ECTs to support individual pupils in a secure environment devoid of peer pressures.

Respondents highlighted the shared sense of professional community in their schools that emerged during the pandemic. Significantly, trainees from both 2019-20 and 2020-21 reported how traditional hierarchical structures in schools appeared more fluid during Covid-19, with a sense of shared purpose and camaraderie evident as all staff worked together to meet the challenges of lockdown and the subsequent disruption of Covid-19 in the classroom.

School and university staff also noted the resilience of trainees and ECTs. Interviews with trainee teachers highlighted how training during the pandemic impacted positively on resilience and comments from school leaders emphasised how the unique nature of the training experience could help produce even better teachers. Those trainees beginning PGCE courses in 2020-21 had made an active decision to train during

Covid-19 and interviews highlighted a willingness to embrace the unique nature of the situation and a sense of agency in undertaking purposeful training when activities in some other professionals were on hold.

A broader sense of global citizenship in the classroom was also reported by trainees, in line with research conducted at the Institute of Education, UCL which found that some teachers believe that living through the experience of the pandemic has resulted in learners being better able to understand their role in the world as citizens of a global community. Our findings revealed how some trainees and ECTs felt able to use the impact of Covid-19 to address such issues as sustainability and global responsibility in their classrooms, but there was also some reporting of the constraints of existing programmes of study and a need for curriculum flexibility and evolution in the light of the pandemic experience.

Recommendation: Schools should continue to embrace the unique skills and experiences of ECTs in the planning and delivery of the curriculum. This can help develop and sustain teacher resilience, teacher agency, a sense of self-efficacy and will strengthen the professional identity of ECTs.

Our research has shown that although the preparation and experience of ECTs during the pandemic may have differed from previous cohorts, it has not necessarily been deficient.

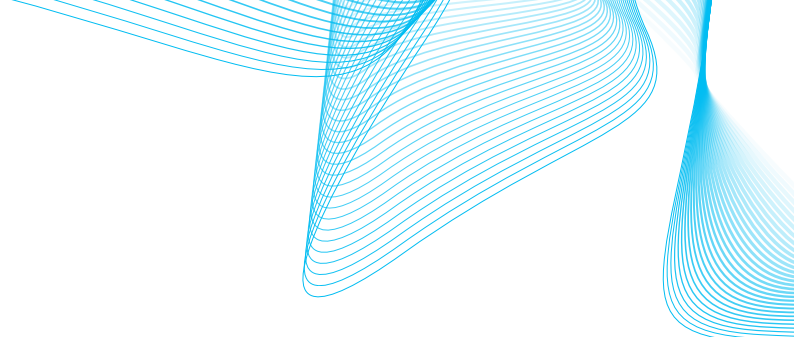
It is our recommendation that schools continue to embrace the unique skills and experiences of ECTs in the planning and delivery of the curriculum, actively seeking opportunities to draw on their perspective and expertise.

Opportunities to embrace the positive aspects of remote learning should also be leveraged by schools, particularly linked to tailored support for individual pupils. The experience and perspectives of ECTs who trained during the pandemic may prove invaluable in this area.

2. For ECTs, there is a disconnect between the need for personalised support in response to their varied training experience and the prescribed content of induction programmes.

Our research has highlighted the varied experiences of training during the Covid-19 pandemic, both within and across cohorts. In contrast to this very individualised picture of training and ongoing support, respondents have consistently referenced the generic nature of many of the Early Career Framework induction materials. Although some respondents commented on the benefits of the structured approach adopted by the ECF, there was widespread agreement that the generic approach falls short of effectively addressing individual needs.

Many ECTs commented on the unnecessary overlap between their initial teacher training and the ECF. Mentors and ECTs highlighted the loss of productive ECT mentor meetings to generic training, with induction becoming more of a 'tick box exercise' than bespoke professional development. It is important to note that our



findings only respond to the first year of the two-year ECF programme and that given the range of providers, we cannot be sure that the experiences that participants shared are representative of every ECF programme.

In addition, a distinct challenge associated with the provision of ongoing support for the cohort who completed their training in 2019-20 is that they are not eligible for support under the ECF.

Recommendation: Bespoke professional development for ECTs is needed to address the highly variable impact of Covid-19 on teacher training and induction.

Training during the Covid-19 pandemic inevitably impacted on the experience of trainees, with opportunities to observe practice, develop behaviour management skills, experience high stakes assessment preparation and undertake marking were curtailed. Respondents also referenced how the transition from trainee to ECT was impacted by the loss of teaching placements during times of lockdown. Although there are common threads in the responses, it is important to note that the training experience was highly individualised. As such, it is our recommendation that bespoke professional development for ECTs is essential to address the highly variable impact of Covid-19 and to meet individual needs.

It is imperative that consideration is given to how ECTs who completed their training in 2019-20 can access bespoke professional development that is responsive to their individual needs, which might include them being given access to ECF training and resources.

It is also necessary to address the bespoke needs of mentors in schools, especially those who came to mentoring during the pandemic. For more experienced mentors, some of the training provided via the ECF has been viewed as ‘rudimentary’ and ‘patronising.’ It is our recommendation that mentor training is linked more specifically to prior experience and that opportunities are sought for collaboration between mentors across schools.

Recommendation: Opportunities for subject specific CPD are also vital for teacher self-efficacy and, potentially, for teacher retention, and should be actively sought.

In the project’s interim [policy brief](#) published in July 2021, we reported how interviews with trainee teachers and ECTs highlighted powerfully the importance of nurturing engagement with and enjoyment of the subject they teach for self-efficacy. We highlighted that ECTs frequently identified a passion for their chosen subject as a key motivating factor in deciding to become a teacher, and that the opportunity to nurture this passion and develop subject specific knowledge through continued professional development (CPD) opportunities can plausibly be linked to the desire to remain in the profession.

Throughout the project, we have found that the Covid-19 pandemic may actually have increased opportunities for subject specific CPD, with a huge variety of lectures, courses and training materials being made available online. It is our recommendation that

schools and universities continue to engage with this content, encouraging both ECTs and trainees to take advantage of material that is still be available.

For example, The Geographical Association's 2022 [National Report](#) (which is designed to seek the views and experiences of GA members about their profession, subject and subject association) includes specific recommendations for policy makers, school and ITE geography practitioners and leaders. In addition, in April 2022 the [Royal Geographical Society](#) launched a free, online programme for trainee and early career geography teachers. These Subject Knowledge Enhancement resources are supported by the DfE and are a good example of subject specific support for trainee and new teachers.

Other examples of improved subject specific training include the award winning [Domains CPD](#) programme from the Institute of Physics, which was expanded during the pandemic.

Training during the pandemic did present specific challenges for trainees in practical subjects. For example, opportunities for science trainees to experience practical lessons were limited and trainees in subjects such as music and PE were unable to engage in practical work. The loss of out of school visits was felt keenly by trainees in Modern Foreign Languages. As such, it is important that these specific challenges are explored through bespoke professional development for ECTs that addresses their individualised and contextualised experience.

3. The teacher training experience during the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in reduced opportunities for pastoral practice, limited parental engagement and a reduced involvement with extracurricular activities.

An inevitable consequence of the training experience during Covid-19 was a reduction in the opportunities to engage in face-to-face engagements with both pupils and parents. Trainees from both the 2019-20 and 2020-21 cohorts reported reduced opportunities for pastoral practice and interaction with pupils outside of subject areas. During the pandemic, parental meetings were exclusively held online, practice that has continued in many schools following the end of restrictions. Interviews with trainees highlighted the limited opportunities to write reports and engage with parents during the pandemic. Coming to this practice as an ECT was therefore very difficult and resulted in feelings of isolation and self-doubt. The experience was captured in the description from one ECT of conducting her first live parent/teacher evening alone in her kitchen at home, rather than being in school with colleagues where she could observe and receive support.

Additionally, curtailed opportunities to participate in the broader aspects of school life have resulted in a limiting of opportunities to interact with pupils outside of subject specific teaching. This has impacted on the development of relational trust. Although some respondents reported a heightened sense of professional community during the pandemic, there was also a sense that some ECTs had felt isolated from the wider school community during the pandemic and so were potentially less invested.

With poor wellbeing cited by [Ofsted](#) as a key reason why teachers choose to leave the profession, it is important that the wellbeing of ECTs is consistently addressed in schools.



Recommendations

- **ECTs should be given opportunities to engage in a range of pastoral activities both in and beyond the school to further develop pastoral skills.**
- **ECTs should be encouraged to participate fully in all aspects of school life and structured support should be provided for interactions with parents and other stakeholders.**

Becoming a teacher during the pandemic provided many trainees with greater insight into the positive contribution teachers and schools make to the lives of young people and their communities. During periods of lockdown, some trainees were able to fully embrace their ‘key worker’ status, contributing to tutoring and catch-up sessions alongside online teaching. However, opportunities to develop face-to-face pastoral skills, including the role of the form tutor, were curtailed.

It is our recommendation that opportunities for engagement in pastoral practice both within and beyond the school should be actively sought for ECTs.

We also recommend that schools seek opportunities for trainees and ECTs to gain a deeper understanding of mental health. This could be aided by participation in online and face-to-face training courses, such as offered by the children’s mental health charity, Place2Be. Such training would help to equip ECTs with the knowledge to promote positive mental health in school communities.

Members of the project team have developed an approach to supporting trainee teachers’ wellbeing which encourages teachers to identify and actualise their personal values within the realities of their contexts. Such strategies could also be helpfully adopted with ECTs in schools.

Barriers to recommendations

Our recommendations arise from the analysis of the extensive data generated from the project and the various engagements with the provisional recommendations via workshops, emails, survey responses and social media.

While we are convinced of the relevance and usefulness of the recommendations, our research has also highlighted potential barriers that should continue to be addressed by policy makers.

1. Time and resources are needed to embed new initiatives

Recent change in ITE has been rapid and extensive, with the [ITT Core Content Framework](#) published in 2019 replacing the 2016 [Framework of Core Content for Initial Teacher Training](#); national implementation of the [Early Career Framework](#) in September 2021, bringing a funded entitlement for all ECTs in England to access a two year professional development programme and the subsequent review of the [ITT market](#).

Taken together, the CCF, the ECF and the market review undoubtedly represent significant policy initiatives, conceived and designed with the ultimate aim of supplying a better trained and better supported and inducted school workforce. But such initiatives need time to embed, particularly given the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its disruption on schools and teacher training. In order for the recommendations here to take effect, there needs to be a sustained period without further policy change to give both schools and ITE providers the time to respond in a planned and measured way.

The provision of time and funding for mentors in schools is a particular concern. [A survey by Teacher Tapp](#) of over 500 school-based mentors found that nearly half of mentors (46%) reported that they have not been given additional non-contact time to work with ECTs, a fact corroborated in around 20% of cases by senior leaders who acknowledge they have not given ECT mentors additional time for their role.

[Evaluation of the national roll-out](#) of the early career framework induction programmes published in 2022, cites ‘perceived’ heavy workload, time commitment and a lack of flexibility as challenges identified by lead providers and their delivery partners. Our findings add detail and specificity to these perceptions, providing documented evidence of the various challenges faced by ECTs, schools and universities.

2. Colliding and contradictory policies

An unintended consequence of such rapid and extensive change has been the identification of contradictions and repetitions in the enactment of policies. For example, many ECTs and mentors have cited the unhelpful repetition between CCF and ECF content, meaning that professional development for ECTs is failing to build on skills and knowledge that has already been acquired.

3. Financial pressures

Our research has revealed that some ECTs are making the active decision not to teach after completing their training due to financial pressures. This is particularly acute for those training and working in expensive cities (such as London), with transport costs, living costs and the increased cost of living all contributing to financial burden. Other ECTs are currently working to pay off debt but are reconsidering whether to remain in teaching.

There remains a disparity among trainee teachers with regard to bursaries and the financial pressures are exacerbated for those whose chosen subject is not eligible for bursary payment.

Although the recommendations from the project will help to address issues of teacher quality and retention, they can do little to address the financial pressures that can lead to ECTs leaving the profession prematurely.



About the project

This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of the UKRI 'Ideas that address Covid-19' grant call. Research findings have been generated through analysis of responses gathered from questionnaires and remote interviews conducted across an 18-month period (April 2021-September 2022), to enable participants' experiences to be captured during both the training year and the first year of practice as an ECT. The findings also draw on a pilot study conducted by the research team between September 2020 and April 2021.

Interviewees included trainee teachers, ECTs, school-based mentors, school leaders, and ITE staff, based on a sample of 400 teachers trained at King's College London.

The project contributes to the rich body of research into teacher education arising from the School of Education, Communication and Society at King's College London. Further guidance for trainees and ECTs is available in the forthcoming 6th Edition of *Becoming a Teacher: Issues in Secondary Education*, due to be published in 2023 by Open University Press and featuring contributions from many of the research team listed below.

The research team

Principal Investigator: Dr Simon Gibbons. Simon's work focuses on teachers' professional development and the impact of policy on practice, utilising qualitative research methods. As Director of Teacher Education at King's College London, Simon leads the ITE programme.

Lead Co-Investigator: Dr Elizabeth Rushton. Lizzie's work considers secondary teacher identity with a focus on science and geography teachers. She has expertise in mixed methods research and has led evaluations of UK-wide science teacher professional development programmes. She also designed and led the pilot study that informs this research. In April 2022, Lizzie joined the Institute of Education, UCL's Faculty for Education and Society as Associate Professor of Education, where she leads the MA Education programme.

Wider research team

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