

Russell Group submission to the House of Commons Education Select Committee's 'Great Teachers' follow up inquiry

1. The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector. This submission is made only on behalf of the Russell Group universities involved in the delivery of teacher training in England.

The value of partnership

2. We agree with the Select Committee 'that partnership between schools and universities is likely to provide the highest-quality initial teacher education, the content of which will involve significant school experience but include theoretical and research elements as well, as in the best systems internationally and in much provision here' (paragraph 78, 'Great Teachers' (2012)). Both partners in this relationship – the schools and the universities – have complementary strengths, and the diminution of either would degrade the quality of the training provided to our future teachers.
3. Teacher training should not only include theory and practice, but it should integrate theory with practice. At Russell Group universities trainees develop their pedagogical understanding through critical reading, discussion and inquiry, while also spending much of the year in the classroom; their education is led by teacher educators who are not only expert practitioners but often leading researchers and lecturers as well.
4. The development of close working relationships with schools is crucial to the delivery of outstanding provision. PGCE provision has been developed by Russell Group universities over many years, during which time strong partnerships have been forged. Our universities have heard in many cases from schools that they are very satisfied with the existing PGCE route. It is notable that where School Direct provision has been introduced, this is often offered by a school and a university that are already working together and have a strong existing relationship.
5. Many Russell Group universities (but not all) have chosen to participate in School Direct and are working hard to make this new arrangement work effectively for trainees. However, the scheme continues to present significant challenges which we report here.

Recruitment challenges

6. The time and resource spent on recruitment of trainees has significantly increased, due in part to additional liaison with schools and facilitating their involvement in the recruitment process. Universities are sharing their greater experience of recruiting trainees with schools to help them in these new arrangements. In addition, in some cases schools have not filled their allocated trainee places. Meanwhile universities with a strong track record in recruitment have had their allocated places cut. Given the challenges of recruiting to this scheme, the rapid expansion of School Direct could pose a significant risk to the supply of future teachers, particularly in some individual subjects (see para 10 below).

Quality assurance

7. In School Direct there is a tension between the roles of the university, which is subject to Ofsted inspection of the quality of training, and the lead schools, which tend to have a dominant role in deciding the content of training. Some schools will rise to the challenge and provide excellent training; but others will find it hard to match the quality of an outstanding university-school training partnership. As different schools develop bespoke training programmes, the management of quality will also become more difficult. Many Russell Group universities are committed to engaging with School Direct, but there are some concerns about the risks to quality that this could entail.

Sustainability

8. There are a number of threats to the sustainability of provision in university education departments, and their combined impact should be evaluated carefully:
 - a. Universities without an 'outstanding' rating have already seen cuts in their places, particularly at secondary level due to demographic changes; there is no guarantee that an 'outstanding' rating will provide protection from further cuts in future.
 - b. Some schools have been less willing to offer placements on existing PGCEs because they are concentrating effort on the more time-consuming demands of School Direct. This reprioritisation is understandable but does have an impact.
 - c. The share of funding that goes to schools negotiated under School Direct reduces the funding received by university education departments increasing the pressure on resources.
9. It is clear that it will be harder for universities to plan their future teacher training provision. If they face too great an uncertainty, some may find they cannot continue with provision in all existing areas. The sustainability of the workforce of teacher educators should also be considered if universities are disincentivised from maintaining all aspects of their portfolios of provision.

Wider impacts

10. The supply of teachers, including specialists in key STEM subjects, will require careful monitoring under these new arrangements. Schools may or may not succeed in recruiting in shortage subject areas under School Direct. Beyond the immediate impact on schools, a teacher shortage could also pose a risk to the success of university widening participation and access programmes. School curriculum changes will require fully resourced and highly-skilled staff, especially in schools that may be already struggling with performance. We want every student with the qualifications, potential and determination to succeed at a Russell Group University to have the opportunity to do so, whatever their background. However a shortage of highly-skilled teachers would only make this challenge tougher.

Managing the introduction of School Direct effectively

11. As stated, many Russell Group universities are working hard in partnership with schools to facilitate the introduction of School Direct. There are already a variety of teacher training routes in England and School Direct is emerging as an additional route. If this one route is expanded too quickly this will pose significant risks to the quality and sustainability of School Direct provision, and crucially to other forms of teacher training provision delivered in partnership with universities.

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