Policy Briefing

A teachable moment: the future of Initial Teacher Education in the age of Covid-19

NASBTT, MillionPlus Deans of Education, UCET June 2020

Introduction

1. It is undeniable that the coronavirus pandemic has thrown education providers across the globe into crisis. In the UK, alongside the NHS, education has been at the forefront of the fight against the virus over the last few months and we believe that education is also the answer to the UK’s post-covid19 recovery and renewal. We can therefore best come through this current crisis if providers and the Department for Education (DfE) work together and it is in that spirit that we publish this joint policy briefing.
2. The impact of Covid-19 on schools has been unlike anything the UK has seen before, and it is unlikely that there will be a substantial return to ‘normal’, even in a purely logistical sense, in the months and years ahead. Nobody expects government to have all the answers in a situation so fast moving, and we believe pooling collective expertise and experience is the best way to protect students and this vital pipeline for key workers.
3. MillionPlus, UCET and NASBTT, as representative organisations of the majority of ITE providers across England, have come together to propose a cross-sector, government-led, **National ITE Covid Response Plan** for the years ahead. This plan will ensure that the necessary steps are taken to provide support and structure that will deliver high-quality ITE (Initial Teacher Education) in a changed world.
4. This crisis will have short, medium and long-term issues for us all to deal with, and getting ahead of them will be critical. Schools for the rest of 2020 and for 2021 will be different to those we have seen before, and the needs of these schools, and the trainees placed within them, will be different also. Exceptional times call for new ways of thinking and we believe we need to think about these changes now, and work on making them an effective reality, so that we are able to deliver for the pupils and teachers of the future.

# A National ITE Covid Response Plan

1. The recovery from the Covid-19 crisis is likely to be lengthy and will require both innovation and collaboration. Given that this crisis is likely to change the way we think and work, the final destination may look different from the picture at the outset. For those of us engaged in ITE, there is a clear and present need to think about the longer-term effects of the crisis and how the whole sector can ensure the very best support possible.
2. To that end we believe that sector bodies who engage with ITE must work together with the DfE to draw up a clear strategy for the next 3-5 years that will ensure clear and robust plans can be drawn up with buy-in and support at every level.
3. We believe that the DfE should convene a consultative group, to *include representatives from* all parts of the sector, to draw up a *National ITE Covid Response Plan*. Such a plan would mean that DfE would not be expected, by itself, to have all the answers. Instead, at a time of crisis, resources and skills can be pooled and the burden shared. The main objective must be to enable high quality ITE to take place as soon as possible and we believe a joined-up plan, with the full support of the sector, can do just that.
4. The National ITE Recovery Plan would be an overarching set of principles answering some key questions on the following core areas of ITE that have been most impacted by Covid-19:   
   * **Safety**  
     How do we ensure ITE can take place across the country in a way that is safe for students, schools and pupils?
   * **High Quality Placements**The crisis has posed, and will continue to pose, questions about how to place trainees in schools at a time when schools are under incredible pressures. How can we ensure that high quality placements are available throughout the country, and what can be done to increase the number of schools engaging in ITE in the years ahead?
   * **Recruitment and Retention**  
     The crisis will have immediate impacts on recruitment and retention as well as more far-reaching and less obvious side-effects. With the development of the DfE’s Early Career Framework and the wider Recruitment and Retention Strategy, how can we ensure these are fit for a post-Covid world?

**SAFETY**

1. The DfE have been right to ensure that safety remains the highest priority during the fight against this virus. All providers are working to make sure that, whatever happens, the safety of all involved is paramount, and that ITE can be shaped to enable it to be delivered safely across the country.
2. Ensuring that there is an equity of experience, however, and that providers and government can both be aware of all the factors and have confidence in that response, we believe a major strand of the overall response plan should focus on safety, and address some of the key outstanding concerns.
3. The criteria around an applicant’s ‘**fitness to teach’** would be one element of this work stream, and something that providers and DfE need to think about as soon as possible to plan for the future. Tailoring provision for those who want to teach but are now vulnerable owing to this disease should be factored in, and the profession would benefit from clear guidance and assessment of this issue by all involved. Linked to this is the issue of those who are in the most vulnerable category, who may currently still be shielding. The system must have provisions to ensure anyone in this category does not lose out, and this needs to be fully thought through so that clear guidance can be accessed by potential applicants.
4. The interaction between external and internal parts of the school is something that will concern all stakeholders also, what is, and should be, the **status of trainees** and how they can interact with schools? The questions regarding who are deemed **essential and non-essential workers** looms large in this discussion currently, and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Schools will rightly be on high alert to protect pupils from the virus and will wish to limit external contact as much as possible, so we will also need to answer questions on external staff, who may work for providers, as ITT observers for example. The sector and the DfE can come together to provide clarity on this issue, in line with wider public health guidelines.
5. This clarification will be needed, and explicit, as unsalaried trainees are not employees of the school in which they are placed, and therefore we could see ramifications in terms of health and safety and the impact on a school’s decision to support trainee teachers. Equally, ITT Providers have a duty of care to the trainees they are supporting and will want to have clear guidance on how to ensure their health and safety as they train to teach. Removing any health and safety obstacles in the way of the system functioning well will be critical, and all parts of the sector must be confident that they are doing the right thing and are being fully supported by government.
6. MillionPlus, UCET and NASBTT would be happy to work with the DfE in drafting and implementing this guidance, and in understanding how trainees fit as important parts of this ecosystem. With members across the entire country such an approach will also help tackle regional variations, and ensure all voices are being heard.

Placements

1. Ensuring sufficient numbers of quality placements for trainee teachers is the single biggest issue facing the 2020-21 academic year, and beyond. Without these placements all other elements of ITE will be severely impacted, and it is therefore imperative that a plan is formed to deal with the immediate, and longer-term, realities of this issue. We believe that this can only be solved by the sector uniting and everyone playing their part.
2. Sector feedback suggests that there is no lack of appetite for ITE and that, for many, recruitment is buoyant. Indeed, in times of economic uncertainty or recession, individuals often look to secure training in professions such as teaching. The particular nature of the current crisis, however, means that a ‘perfect storm’ of strong recruitment may be met with a significant shortage of schools willing and able to place trainees. While it is perfectly understandable at this time that placements will not be the highest priority for schools, allowing placement capacity to reduce will deepen the crisis both now and into the years ahead, and inaction now will critically undermine the pipeline into the profession.
3. Therefore, a *Response Plan for Placements*, as part of a wider *National ITE Covid Response Plan*, would be of critical help to the sector, drawing on expertise from a range of providers and stakeholders to tackle this issue.
4. This would mean looking first and foremost at any barriers that schools may find to participating with ITE in the year ahead, either for schools with a strong track-record of participation or those who have not engaged thus far. To that end, there should be consultative work done within such a plan on some key **questions around how ITE can be modified so that it delivers in a Covid, and a post-Covid, world**. The DfE have already outlined some changes and additional flexibilities, which are welcome. However, the sector working together could better establish best practice and an understanding of what quality looks like during the recovery from this pandemic, so that all applicants and students can have confidence that their experience will be equitable with others, and that their training will be both high quality and also fit for the world they are going into.
5. There will clearly be discussions to be had at the moment on virtual and blended learning, so the sector and DfE coming together to talk about these would be beneficial, as would establishing if any adaptations to the teacher standards are to be made to reflect this new reality - acknowledging the different skills that may be required as well as the long-established ones? Through this work we can chart a path that remains grounded in the standards and in high-quality provision, but is also aware of the challenges we face and seeking to use all resources at our disposal to meet it. They in no way suggest a relaxation of standards, rather, they acknowledge that the teachers of the future will need additional skills after this crisis, and having a concerted plan for a recovery that focuses not just on the here and now, but also tries to build a better system for the future would bring some positive benefits out of an otherwise challenging and tragic period.

Following this, the sector and government can then explore building on the work needed now and integrating it into a 3-5-year plan and beyond. Perhaps the most pressing question in this regard would be to ask **how can we incentivise more schools to play an active part in ITE in the future?** In order to have greater numbers of placements, and with greater quality, we need more schools to play an active part in the training future generations of the profession. The plan should make this the central focus of its work and explore why schools do not engage and then think about how more can be tempted to do so in the future, for the good of everyone. Would a system mandating schools to play an active part be worthwhile in a few years’ time? Should active participation in ITE be a criterion Ofsted assess when evaluating a school in the future? We believe these questions, and others like them, would be incredibly useful for the profession and can take ITE forward beyond the recovery into a better place than it is today.

1. A *Response Plan for Placements* could provide the government with the help and expertise it needs in order to better co-ordinate ITE in the years ahead. Of course, we must also be mindful of regional needs, but without full cooperation across the sector we could see fragmentation and division, as well as increased competition that could be to the severe detriment of trainees and their education. Now is the time to come together as a sector and have these discussions.

Recruitment and Retention

1. Although there is some evidence that recruitment may not be initially problematic, there are key aspects of it that do need urgent consideration and that would benefit from a sector-wide consultation – particularly if we are entering an era of economic downturn married to a wider appreciation of teachers as ‘key workers’.
2. We believe discussions around realistic expectation management will be important, with applicants needing to understand the different world they may be operating in. This is particularly true for those students training under a system of tuition fees where they are, in effect, investing in their own education. There are also likely to be particular challenges associated with recruiting for primary, at both undergraduate and PGCE level, as well as in traditionally hard to recruit secondary subjects, such as Physics and Chemistry.
3. The system as it is set up now is, therefore, perhaps in need of re-evaluation, owing to the seismic shifts that have happened this year. This does not suggest that things do need to change, but it would be unwise not to think them through and ensure some parts of the system do not now, in this new world, end up creating unintended consequences.
4. A discussion around the use of **bursaries** on certain subjects would be useful, as well as further discussions on the use of **Subject Knowledge Enhancement (SKE)** courses as a tool for greater recruitment and retention. A full and frank evaluation of how **timetabling issues** (largely in university providers) could impact on recruitment to those courses, and how **marketing** (from both DfE and providers themselves) may need new and careful thought. A dedicated plan of action on these points could provide clarity for providers, schools and applicants and would benefit from sector buy-in and expertise.
5. On the retention side, a serious focus needs to also be given over to how can we create a **bespoke NQT settlement** for the year(s) ahead? Newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in the year ahead will face unprecedented challenges, and the current system may not be able to support them. NASBTT, UCET and MillionPlus worked with the DfE on the development of the **Early Career Framework (ECF)** and we support the principles on which it is based. However, the ECF was not designed for the exceptional circumstances faced by schools as a result of the pandemic. We feel that a discussion is needed urgently on the nature and implementation of the ECF, to recognise the singular circumstances that NQTs will be in, with some revisions made to ensure that the necessary and relevant support is on hand. Such a modification will by no means suggest that NQTs in 2020-21 will lack any ability or be any less qualified, it will instead recognise that the skills required to teach will be different in the year ahead. ITT Providers are well placed to help deliver NQT support across the country at a time where schools may have reduced capacity, and additional funding in this area could be made to go a long way if put to use effectively.
6. Very much allied to this work is ensuring NQTs have access to **high-quality mentoring work**. With the capacity of schools and potential mentors being almost certainly reduced at just the time when it is likely that we will have the greatest need for mentoring support, a joined-up approach is critical now. Owing to the expertise and capacity of the ITT sector, we believe that there will be substantial benefits to be gained from the DfE utilising and harnessing the expertise of ITT Providers to work with schools in the development of excellent mentoring services. This can create a blueprint for future ECF work in the years ahead, and funding should be made available to facilitate this vital work if it is to succeed in the way the DfE originally envisaged.

Conclusion

1. Exceptional times call for creativity, innovation and closer collaboration. We believe that the scale of the current crisis presents enormous challenges to ITE, however we also believe these challenges can be met and that quality provision can still be assured across the country.
2. The creation of a *National ITE Covid Response* Plan, with the DfE working closely with ITT Providers, schools, teaching school hubs, academy trusts and other stakeholders in this area, could create a blueprint that would inspire confidence and would deliver for the sector.
3. This plan would address the key questions around placements, safety, and the future of recruitment and retention and would fit in well with the work that has already been undertaken by government, prior to the Covid crisis. We wholeheartedly welcome and value the introduction of the ECF, the ITT Core content Framework, and the Recruitment and Retention Strategy, but with a changed world we see the development of a coherent 3-5 year plan as the natural and necessary next step to help to ensure the continued delivery of high quality ITE.
4. This work can, and should, be established quickly, to ensure we know all of the immediate issues for the next academic year and that we then have the scope to address the longer-term questions on the future of ITE provision.
5. This will be a significant piece of work and it cannot be done by the DfE alone. UCET, NASBTT and MillionPlus have already begun to work on some the questions and proposals included in this briefing but we believe these should feed into a wider discussion, which is why full buy-in from across all parts of the sector is essential.
6. The scale of the challenges faced in ITE may be daunting, and we are coming from a situation where uncertainty around how next year will look is widespread. However, with a coordinated effort, based on a shared belief in the importance and value of high-quality ITE, it will be possible to overcome these obstacles and ensure that no trainee teacher or pupil will be let down. ITT Providers remain committed to working with the DfE and all other ITE stakeholders in delivering provision now and in the years ahead, and we believe working together to deliver a *National ITE Covid Response Plan* will enable us to look to the future with confidence.

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