

# Golden Thread or Gilded Cage?

An analysis of Department for  
Education support for the continuing  
professional development of teachers

Prepared by the Continuing Professional Development Forum of  
the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET)

## Executive Summary

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## Executive Summary

This report was developed over a ten-month period building on extensive consultation with over 50 professionals directly involved with CPD provision for teachers in England.

The report seeks to highlight the strengths, weaknesses and unforeseen impacts of the Early Career Framework (ECF) and National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), one year into the national roll-out of the ECF.

### *Particular strengths of the ECF include:*

- Provision of a coherent programme of professional development over an extended period
- Recognition of the importance of mentoring and coaching in professional development
- An emphasis on wellbeing particularly in relation to introducing strategies to manage workload
- Different providers developing their own programmes based on the ECF has the potential to provide comparative learning opportunities across the sector.

In addition to these benefits, the NPQs offer a range of different pathways that help to map out opportunities for alternative career stages.

Concerns with the ECF and NPQ programmes are sub-divided into content and implementation.

## Concerns with content

### *These include:*

- A high level of repetition both between the initial Core Content Framework (CCF) and the ECF as well across the NPQs; this discourages learners and means content is missed
- A lack of progression from CCF to ECF through to NPQs; statements are repeated rather than reinforced in any meaningful manner
- A limited research base underpinning these programmes; alternative views that would serve to deepen teachers' professional understanding are not presented
- Generic content that cannot be contextualised; a limited range of case studies are used rather than drawing on practice in the teacher's own setting
- The place of Special Educational Needs and disability (SEND), particularly the 'behaviourist' approach taken to behaviour management which is counterproductive with many children
- The absence of any reference to the climate crisis and ecological emergency which represent the context within which our economy is developing.

## Concerns with implementation

*These include:*

- The need for mentors to 'backfill' the programme with contextualised learning due to the uniform content; this can add significantly to mentor workload
- Providing mentors and support for their development places considerable strain on schools; this represents a huge risk to the programme
- Mentoring costs are such that some schools avoid recruiting newly qualified teachers; this is exacerbated by diminishing pay differentials between recruits and experienced teachers
- The ECF assumes a common starting point which is rarely the case; continuity from initial training to CPD is actually lost, despite the golden thread narrative
- The sequencing of material needs to be more flexible to reflect the experiences and concerns of early career teachers
- There is a misalignment between Ofsted requirements, the Teacher Standards and the ECF and NPQ frameworks; this needs to be addressed
- ECF and NPQ facilitator training is prescriptive and often led by non-experts; this hampers the development of professionals in this role
- The critical role of the induction tutor within schools is underplayed or absent, yet this role is key to supporting early career teachers.

## In conclusion

We recognise that the Department for Education (DfE) has sought to alleviate workload pressures, an ambition that we commend; however, it seeks to do this partly by removing the need for teachers to be creative problem solvers. This contracts out crucial elements of the teacher's role such as curriculum development. Such a move is unlikely to contribute to the retention of teachers because it stifles agency and creativity.

The capacity of the whole system to think critically appears to be undermined by an approach across the ECF/NPQ framework that belies a narrow definition of what a teacher/school should be; far from being a 'golden thread' this is more of a gilded cage, restricting meaningful, career-long professional development. De-professionalising teachers in this way will surely exacerbate the retention crisis.

Two survey-based reports on the ECF (IMS/BMG 2022; Ford et al 2022) highlight an apparently weak effect on teacher retention as well as challenges faced in implementation. This paper provides some explanation for those findings.

There are welcome signs that such evaluations as well as feedback from schools is being heard. New freedoms have been granted to providers including flexibility with the timing and sequencing of sessions. In an acknowledgement of the need to consider mentor wellbeing, some of the demands on mentors have been reduced. Providers are however, tied to DfE guidelines on programme design and are unable to reduce the length of sessions or to alter content without approval. This maintains the fidelity of the programmes at the expense of flexibility and denies time to develop learning communities. Being faithful to a programme that is not achieving what it set out to do will prove counterproductive.

The ECF and NPQs represent a significant investment in teacher professional development; we hope that this paper will contribute to ensuring that this investment is effective in challenging and inspiring teachers in order to retain them over the long term. It will be important to study the impact of the ECF and NPQs on the recruitment and retention of teachers and to ensure that the programme adapts to feedback as well as the changing needs of the profession. We trust that our analysis will contribute to that process.

**See the full paper here: [www.linktofullpaper.co.uk](http://www.linktofullpaper.co.uk)**

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