

Evidence check into the National College of Teaching and Leadership (NCTL)

1. About million+

million+ is a university think-tank which provides evidence and analysis on policy and funding regimes that impact on universities, students and the services that universities and other higher education institutions provide for business, the NHS, education and the not-for-profit sectors. million+ has submitted evidence to the Committee's previous Inquiries including in relation to School Direct.

2. Working relationships

million+ has enjoyed cordial working relationships with some divisions of NCTL and NCTL staff and hosts a Deans of Education group which meets with NCTL representatives on a regular basis. This has provided an opportunity for information exchange and feedback but also a forum for discussion about the evidence base on which NCTL policies are being pursued.

3. Quality of evidence, decision-making and delivery

NCTL does not always appear to apply the robust, high quality evidence-based approach to teacher education recruitment and allocations that its brief requires. There are also concerns that NCTL's communications strategy appears to under-value university-led routes into Initial Teacher Training (ITT). In this respect we would draw the Committee's attention to the following:

(i) Allocation policy and recruitment outcomes

In spite of the rhetoric about schools and universities working in partnership in all of the training routes into teaching that are available, NCTL allocations continue to increase in respect of School Direct and SCITTs. This runs counter to the evidence about the overall effectiveness of different ITT providers in respect of ITT recruitment. School Direct has consistently under-recruited against ITT numbers allocated. In contrast, universities have continued to be much more reliable in delivering to ITT allocations. In light of this evidence, it is difficult to understand the basis on which NCTL decided to switch even more ITT numbers to School Direct in the 2015-16 admissions year.

(ii) Over-allocations against target

NCTL's allocations policy has been underwritten by a policy of over-allocation of ITT numbers against the target numbers of teachers required – targets identified through NCTL's own modelling which includes subject specialisms. There has always been some over-allocation, including by the former TDA. However, over-allocation of numbers against target increased to record levels in the 2015-16 admissions year. A policy of over-allocation now appears to be integral to NCTL's strategy of increasing ITT allocations to School Direct.

While this increases the complexity of working out just where under-recruitment or over-recruitment is taking place in respect of providers and subject disciplines, more importantly this strategy appears to have been adopted by NCTL primarily as a protection against School Direct under-recruitment. Excessive over-allocations are unlikely to provide a robust basis on which to deliver future teacher supply. While they provide a potential 'get-out-of-jail card' for NCTL in terms of under-recruitment, students run the risk of being recruited to train in subject specialisms but finding that they have trained in areas or disciplines where there is over-supply.

(iii) Reallocation of ITT numbers during the admissions cycle

ITT numbers are re-allocated during the admissions year although in the first year of School Direct NCTL were unable to require schools to relinquish allocated places. NCTL decision-making in respect of the reallocation of ITT numbers in the course of an admissions year continues to be a cause of significant concern. In early 2014, NCTL sought to reallocate ITT numbers which school direct providers had relinquished from their initial allocation. However, these numbers were offered to other schools and SCITTs but not to universities. Universities were only invited to bid for additional numbers for the 2014-15 admissions year in early July 2014, once NCTL had decided that schools did not wish to make any further bids.

The problems with this approach have been outlined in detail to NCTL: by July many universities have already made decisions about the viability of courses and recruitment material is focused on clearing. All ITT candidates are now required to pass on-line skills tests in literacy and numeracy prior to commencing a course. A policy of late allocations therefore places additional pressures on providers to ensure that candidates attend testing centres and successfully complete the tests. Notwithstanding this evidence, universities found out through an NCTL circular issued in January 2015 that schools and SCITTs were being invited by NCTL to bid for additional (reallocated) numbers for the 2015-16 admissions year. The rationale that NCTL has given for this decision is that schools recruit smaller numbers. However, NCTL is not operating in an even-handed way and universities are being treated as providers of last resort in terms of the redistribution of numbers in 2015-16 and opportunities to recruit high quality candidates at this stage.

Universities have also pointed out 'omissions' in NCTL's communication strategy e.g. universities are not always invited to NCTL-promoted recruitment / campaign events and have only been made aware of the latter through a school partner.

(iv) Subject Knowledge Enhancement (SKE)

Universities have long experience in offering SKE courses which enable potential candidates to improve skills and knowledge particularly in subject specialist areas where there are shortages, prior to embarking on an ITT course. The system of allocations adopted by NCTL at one point provided no guarantee that universities would be able to offer a place to SKE candidates in the following year. Allocations of ITT numbers in particular subject areas have also been made with no regard to a university's past experience in SKE.

(v) Skills Tests

Universities and schools have identified problems with the online Skills Tests both in respect of their administration by contractors but also the nature of the tests. It continues to be Ministerial policy that these tests are retained. The tests themselves are the responsibility of the Skills Testing Agency. However, there are concerns about the nature of the tests and the delivery by contractors.

4. Methodology and retention

The methodology used by NCTL to assess teacher supply appears to take less account of regional needs in comparison to the approach adopted by the former TDA. Workforce planning is also heavily influenced by retention. While NCTL may be undertaking some research into the latter it remains a key issue and an area which requires a more focused approach.

5. NCTL and DfE

The decision to bring responsibility for teacher training 'in-house' may have disadvantaged NCTL in terms of progressing decisions based on evidence, quality criteria and outcomes and, to a greater extent than in the past, politicised the planning and delivery of teacher supply and education. However, NCTL delivery has also been notable by annual changes in policies, short timescales and difficulties in communications which have taken little account of the business requirements of providers.

It will be important that NCTL demonstrates in the future that decisions are based on robust evidence linked with a long-term, transparent and effective strategy to plan and deliver high quality teacher supply in all regions.

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