Dear Ms Davidson,

Teacher Workforce planning for Scotland’s schools – response from the Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh to the Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee

Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to teacher workforce planning for Scotland’s schools. As we are responding from an HE perspective, we will limit our response to the matter of teacher recruitment, rather than on retention. Our response largely covers Q1 (challenges to teacher recruitment), Q2 (processes for recruiting the right number of teachers) and Q4 (trainee teachers and non-completion)

Despite the vital role that teacher’s play, the public perception of teaching is conflicting. On the one hand, the teaching profession is recognized as an honorable profession which benefits society, however, this is positioned against a view that the work of a teacher is becoming increasingly complex leading to lower job satisfaction, stress and heavy workloads. Certainly, our students returning from site-based learning have voiced concerns about perceived workloads and the responsibilities facing teachers on a day-to-day basis. In particular, student teachers report significant paperwork related to assessment and the lack of planning time for classroom teachers. Some report having no mentor appointed or appointed very late; mentors having not protected time so any feedback is provided ‘on the run’ and mentors not being adequately prepared for their roles.

It is therefore encouraging that applications to enter teaching continue to be generally buoyant. Many still view teaching as rewarding and desirable but numbers are also supported by Scottish Government teacher workforce planning which provides assurances of job security and opportunities for applicants. As a provider of teacher education, a key role we have is to work with partners such as central and local government, the Third sector, parent and community organisations to assist prospective pupils, parents and the community to understand teaching to be an excellent career choice. In Moray House, we stress the transformative possibilities teachers can make to the life opportunities of their pupils and the pivotal role each teacher has to ‘making the difference’.

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Recruitment of high quality applicants for postgraduate qualification as teachers in the primary sector is not an issue. For example, the majority of our applicants to PGDE primary come to us with 2.1 or first class degrees, many with considerable professional and life experience. It is not uncommon to have applicants who already hold Master’s degrees or a doctorate. The picture is less positive for the secondary sector which we will discuss later.

A key challenge in relation to recruitment is the relatively late confirmation of our intake targets. Typically, we are given a heads up around Christmas each year but it can be as late as March before controlled numbers are confirmed in a recruitment cycle in which the UCAS application deadline is 15 January and institutions are expected to make all of their offers by 31 March. The Scottish Council of Deans will be asking for this date of 15th January to be revisited so that we have an earlier deadline. In addition, when there is significant variation from year to year, it is difficult for us as a provider and employer to engage in our own internal workforce planning.

We would like to work with the Scottish Government to move away from the current system, which sees targets change every year, toward setting targets for a three or five-year period, with minor changes negotiated each year as required. Sudden fluctuations such as the forthcoming reduction in PGDE Primary numbers for 2018-19, a predicted drop of 55%, will impact significantly on each teacher education provider. This does not assist stability or quality for the sector.

The issue of the difficulty to recruit to some secondary subject areas is one that is shared by government, employers and teacher education providers. Government has attempted to address this shortage by widening routes into teaching. As a provider, we will continue to do our best to increase recruitment through more intensive marketing, adapting content to be more attractive to particular graduates and working in partnership with STEM subject areas within the University to enthuse primary and secondary pupils into these disciplines. The success of such initiatives will take time. We are, however, concerned that the current funding model and approach to target setting does not effectively encompass the step-change in costs as cohort sizes increase. For example, an increase in target intake from 20 to 25 would incur student-specific costs associated with additional placement, tutor and other support, whereas an increase to 27 would additionally require additional teaching rooms, recruitment of additional teaching staff and an expansion of marketing activities. In the event that recruitment does not fully achieve the extended target, claw back of funding for the unfilled places leaves the school carrying the “step-change” costs.

Securing sufficient numbers of site-based learning opportunities for our students can be challenging. While we appreciate from next year (2017-18), schools will be asked to opt in rather than to opt out when offering placements, we remain concerned that not enough is being done to alert schools to this change of approach which may result in many last minute ‘opt outs’. We have had schools rescind placements at the very last minute often with no explanation. All of this causes a huge amount of work for university placement staff, increased anxiety and potentially a less than effective training experience for the student.

Greater partnership and collaboration is required between university schools of education, government, teacher employers and subject associations so that pupils in schools can be systematically mentored, monitored, provided work place experience, summer schools and potentially scholarships to consider entry into subject shortage areas. We would be very keen to harness university wide resources, including those in the School of Education Teacher Education Partnership, to work with Government to pilot effective recruiting and mentoring strategies to ensure a route-to-teaching for pupils interested in shortage areas.
One area that could be looked at is the GTCS requirements for English. For our MSc in Transformative Learning and Teaching commencing in September 2017, we successfully argued for teacher graduates to have Higher English by the time they exit rather than to have Higher English at the point of entry. The exception to this is for those entering the MSc to become teachers of English. With such rigid requirements at the point of entry, we are turning away non-UK students who hold a UK masters degree but whose High School diploma is not deemed equivalent to Higher English. To assist a greater diversity in the workforce, it would be helpful for university providers to apply individual assessment of English competency for the postgraduate stages of teacher education, particularly in relation to entry into the STEM subjects. It would also be helpful to have a nationally agreed entry equivalence across the institutions so that there is greater consistency between different admission bodies. This would reduce frustration for applicants.

Another significant challenge in relation to teacher recruitment is the need to alter the demographics of Scotland’s teaching force. The workforce is recognized to be highly homogenous particularly in terms of gender (largely female), ethnicity (largely white) and in terms of language (largely monolingual). As with the issue of low recruitment to certain subject areas, a partnership approach is required to alter the demographics of the teaching workforce. A media appeal to under-represented groups is a start but such initiatives need to be accompanied with systematic advice and support to future applicants, not dissimilar to the suggestions made relating to subject shortage areas. In addition, there needs to be sustained work done on changing the ethos and culture of workplaces that have for too long been used to homogeneity. This is neither a swift nor easy process. There needs to be dialogue with teachers (presently and formerly in the system) from under-represented groups to seek advice on how to develop an inclusive environment so that those who are in minority groups are not ‘othered’ in subliminal ways on an everyday basis. Part of changing ethos and culture has to include consideration of how daily micro-invalidations occur that might discourage people from joining and staying in the profession. From our experience, nothing works more effectively as a barrier than negative word-of-mouth advice by under-represented groups who have not felt supported in the profession.

In relation to Q4, in our post-graduate Primary and Secondary programmes, we find that only around 2% choose to delay their studies or withdraw from their studies. This has typically been for the following reasons: pre-existing mental health issues, increased insight into the teaching profession and observations of the challenges of behaviour management, wider responsibilities than previously imagined, more intensive workload at university than expected, students becoming disillusioned with what they see to be compromised and highly variable classroom and school based practice e.g. ‘I just don’t want to be like that teacher or to work in a school like that..’. Students express concern as to the flexibility or otherwise of being able to choose a ‘good fit’ school should they find themselves in a school ethos which does not chime with their professional values.

Yours sincerely

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