

Teacher education for the FE and Skills sector 2024 and beyond

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Introduction

Over the last few years various terminology for post 16 education has been used interchangeably, dependent upon the government policy and political landscape of the time. Readers may have come across terms such as 'post-compulsory, lifelong learning sector' (LLL), 'further education and training' and occasionally 'post-14 education'. However, following recent policy guidelines and initiatives the sector is now referred to as the further education and skills (FES) sector, and over the last two to three years it has been at the forefront and in the line of sight by the DfE, with the sector seeing the biggest overhaul in its teacher training qualifications since early in the 2000s. This article seeks to discuss some of the changes and the rationale behind them, with a personal view of the future.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for the sector

There is a plethora of reports, government initiatives and documents related to the FES sector, going back to the 1944 McNair report, which looked at deficiencies in recruiting and training teachers for the post-compulsory sector, up to the more recent FE White Paper 'Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth' (2021).

In 2007, the Further Education Teachers' Qualifications (England) Regulations came into force, together with the Further Education Teachers' Continuing Professional Development and Registration setting out four main areas for teachers in the sector:

- to hold or acquire, within a specified period of time, recognised qualifications;
- to complete a period of professional formation leading to Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) status;

- to complete at least 30 hours of continuing professional development each year and provide an annual record to the Institute for Learning (IfL);
- to be registered with IFL and maintain that registration continuously.

This was revoked in 2012, and the sector appeared to have been coasting along, the exception being that the Wolf Report of 2011 recommended that: QTLS should be recognised in schools. This will enable schools to recruit qualified professionals to teach courses at school level (rather than bussing pupils to colleges) with clear efficiency gains.

However, early in 2022 the DfE turned its sight to the FE sector and its qualifications, and deemed that the existing Diploma was outdated, so to bring it up to date and ensure parity with the schools sector the qualification needed a major rewrite.

The rewrite

A small working party, comprising higher education institutions (HEIs), the DfE, ETF, UCET, awarding bodies and colleges, was commissioned to review the qualification and to propose an alternative - the caveat being that whatever was developed had to be aligned with the occupational standards for the learning and skills teacher (2023) and must also meet the DfE's minimum expectations, which included on-line teaching and a requirement of maths and English level 2 or equivalent prior to entry onto programme. HEI's were told that they could still write the programme at levels 5, 6 and 7 and use the Cert.Ed PGCE nomenclature, but it had to be mapped to the new framework that would be developed for the new Diploma in Teaching for the FES sector.

The result

Currently two main qualifications routes exist: an apprenticeship and an academic qualification.

Apprenticeship

The apprenticeship 'Learning and Skills teacher' relates to an occupation that, according to the Institute for Apprenticeships (2023):

is found in all parts of the Further Education and Skills Sector (FES), usually in settings where students are aged 16 and above (a small number of teachers may teach 14-16 year-olds in alternative provision).

www.instituteforapprenticeships.org/apprenticeship-standards/learning-and-skills-teacher.

As a route the apprenticeship typically takes 18 months to complete and is assessed via an end-point assessment, which includes a viva, against the occupational standards aligned to the apprenticeship. The occupational duties comprise a set of knowledge, skills and behaviours that the apprentice should demonstrate to meet the minimum expectations of the role. To be eligible for this route a trainee requires English and maths at level 2 prior to taking the end-point assessment and a level 3 qualification or experience in their subject area. This qualification is currently level 5 only.

Academic qualifications

The other route is via an academic qualification. These qualifications can be undertaken part time (in-service) or full time (pre-service). It is available at level 5, 6 or 7. Both routes require a minimum level 3 subject qualification, or extensive experience in the sector and level 2 maths and English prior to starting the programme.

For the part-time route you would normally work in the sector and would undertake the qualification over two years, either with an awarding body or a university. For the full time route you would normally be based in a university or college with HE provision (the latter usually working in partnership with a university) and complete a placement to gain the teaching hours and experience required.

Considerations

Whilst I personally welcome an update to the qualifications for the sector, I am fearful that the two new routes will only add to the perceived vocational/academic divide, with the 'academic route' being seen

as superior, and whilst personally to me it's the qualification and ability not the level that would make me employ someone, I have had many applicants who have level 5 and want to upgrade (which they cannot because of funding regulations) because they feel a PGCE is 'better'. In addition, I have a slight concern about the discrepancies with entry requirements, and, whilst not degrading the need for maths and English as a requirement, surely the requirement for entry and not at the end-point could also add to the superiority of academia versus work-based?

Final thoughts

The impact of this new qualification is yet to be felt, as it does not come into force until September 2024, and in the interim we have had a change of government, with possible different views on sector needs and QTS/QTLS.

My own personal thoughts are that we should as a sector give the QTLS status at the end of the programme rather than through a process of professional formation with a cost element. This would bring us closer to the schools sector. In addition, I believe that in the future organisations offering the qualifications will need to be accredited, and, whilst hopeful we avoid the market review approach, I think it inevitable that to maintain quality - and possibly control - the DfE will champion a 'selection/accreditation' process, similar to the LLUK process back in 2006! It is also worth noting that for 2024 funding has been removed for some training organisations, effectively forcing them out of the market and forcing awarding bodies to reconsider their offer.

For the qualification itself, as someone who was on the working party I think time will tell. There are already concerns regarding the on-line element, with the sector not really having any on-line teaching post Covid, and, whilst on-line pedagogy is important, should we insist on x amount of hours? There are concerns regarding the two placements required (academic only), in particular for in-service trainees, and whilst a broad experience of the sector is desirable, is it imperative for those employed to do a particular role? There are also concerns regarding the mentoring requirement of two mentors, subject and pastoral, and the number of hours required in a sector that has no funding and relies mostly on good-will. Finally, the requirements around SEND and ESOL, perpetuated by OFSTED inspections, is also problematic. Yes, our teachers need to have the tools to work with SEND/ESOL learners, but to insist that this is demonstrable in every class is not always practical and should not be a barrier to our trainee teachers.