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Billcliffe, Steve

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The Views Of PTLLS Students During A Period Of Change Within The Lifelong Learning Sector

Steve Billcliffe

Oxford Brookes University

The Westminster CETT

Abstract

This paper focuses on Initial Teacher Training (ITT) within a Further Education College in the south-east of England. It is based on a small-scale research project among 106 adults who successfully studied for the City & Guilds qualification Preparing to Teach in the Lifelong Learning Sector (PTLLS) between 2010 and 2013, a time of significant change in ITT policy. It explores the opinions of 29 self-selecting participants who completed an online questionnaire using the SurveyMonkey tool. The results show that trainee teachers seem to be optimistic for their future and a large majority of respondents would support the establishment of an FE Guild. Teacher Educators will note that 82% of the respondents have obtained some teaching experience since completing PTLLS. The survey found that only a small number of respondents had progressed to higher levels of teacher training since completing PTLLS, although a variety of future career plans were being made.

Key Words

Initial Teacher Training; PTLLS; Lifelong Learning; FE College; Career Change.

Introduction

The changes that have taken place within the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) in recent years have been dominated by political policy shifts. The construction and subsequent dismantling of structural and funding frameworks have left many people dismayed and anxious for the future of Further Education (FE). Practitioners in the LLS have argued that they should be given the same professional recognition and status as teachers in the school sector. Hillier and Appleby's article in the NIACE publication *Adults Learning* (2012) describes the 'see-saw' (p. 11) impact of policy changes on the sector, even questioning the need for training of FE teachers given such an uncertain future. The article contains a comprehensive and chronological summary of the '*uneven policy landscape*' (p. 8) that the LLS has traversed in recent years and explains how government-sponsored White Papers and reports have encouraged and then, a few years later, discouraged the regulation of FE teachers' qualifications and professional status. Colleges and training providers, their students and staff, governors and the communities they serve, have struggled to make sense of the uncertainty of national policy, particularly towards adult education. An editorial in *Teaching in Lifelong Learning* (Robinson, 2013) has described Further Education Teacher Training (FETT) as being '*in turmoil*'. Duckworth and Tummons put the blame for '*ideologically-driven*' policy changes at the door of a government seeking to '*...attack the professionalism and independence of...teachers*' with frequent new initiatives that have '*swamped*' practitioners (2010: pp. 42-43).

Despite these uncertain times there has continued to be a flow of aspiring FE teachers seeking to enter the industry. This paper summarises the results of a survey conducted amongst 106 of these new entrants who all enrolled on an ITT course, PTLLS, with the same FE college during the years 2010-2013. The purpose of the research was to determine the candidates' reasons for studying for an initial teaching qualification and what progress they had made since completing their training. For the past six years, PTLLS has been widely recognised as a suitable induction qualification for all those who seek the knowledge and skills required to enter the regulated or unregulated LLS (in England) as

teachers or trainers. The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) went so far as to say that '*...the relevance of PTLLS in particular is almost beyond question*' (BIS, 2012b: p. 55). This paper focuses on the last three years of the PTLLS Award, which coincided with the election of a new coalition government in the UK, a significant change in policy towards the LLS, and in a reduction in public funding of adult education.

This first section of the paper sets the context for the topic under review and is followed with an explanation of the origins of the PTLLS qualification and the design and distribution of the survey. The survey results are then summarised and are related to current national policy changes. A concluding section seeks to relate the research findings to the continually changing LLS landscape including a new ITT qualification being launched in 2013/14 and the creation of a new organisation responsible for the quality of teaching and learning in the sector, the Education and Training Foundation.

Context

The PTLLS qualification was introduced in 2007 following a period of consultation with awarding bodies and stakeholders within FETT. Government policy at the time stated that '*holding a relevant qualification will increasingly become a requirement for people working in the FE system*' (DIUS, 2007). The syllabus for teaching PTLLS drew on professional standards previously developed by the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO), later enhanced by the sector skills council, Lifelong Learning UK, and then the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). All three organisations have since been abolished. A number of awarding bodies have offered the PTLLS qualification during the last six years including the international publishing company Pearson (through its educational arm, EDI). Smaller awarding organisations such as Ascentis, Highfield Awarding Body for Compliance (HABC), NCFE and National Training Resources (NTR) have also promoted PTLLS as the ideal qualification for new entrants to teaching and training. The FE College where this research was conducted has been a strategic partner with City & Guilds for many years for FETT and adopted their PTLLS qualification as a natural successor to the popular City & Guilds 7303 Certificate course previously offered. A large number of colleges and private training providers are City & Guilds accredited Centres – there are more than 20 Centres offering the City & Guilds PTLLS qualification within an hour's drive of the FE college where this research took place. No prior teaching experience or qualifications are necessary to undertake the Level 3 PTLLS course although literacy and numeracy skills equivalent to a GCSE Grade C are required. According to City & Guilds, PTLLS attract people looking for a career change as well as adults already working in the sector (perhaps as Learning Support Assistants or Technicians) who would like to progress to gain an initial teaching qualification (<http://www.cityandguilds.com>).

Student profile

A total of ten PTLLS courses were taught by the college between 2010 and 2013. Three of these programmes were delivered as traditional evening classes lasting between 10 and 12 weeks each. Three other courses were offered in the day to meet a demand for more family-friendly sessions, again lasting one term. Four intensive versions of the PTLLS course, using the same syllabus as the longer courses, were taught as either six-day bespoke programmes for employers or for specific cohorts of newly-appointed college staff. All ten programmes included in this survey were taught by the same Teacher Educator.

The personal profile of the students tended to reflect the target audience for the different types of course delivery. Thus, the evening class courses attracted an older age group

with students employed in other sectors and looking to move into a teaching career. Some people (for example, members of the armed forces) were approaching retirement or were facing redundancy. A number of the PTLLS students were already vocationally qualified in subjects such as Hairdressing, Floristry or Engineering and were keen to share their skills and provide themselves with an additional source of income. Some of the younger PTLLS students (who attended the college's intensive courses) were recent university graduates looking to establish a career in FE, and some were employed as Curriculum Support Workers in the college.

An analysis of the enrolment data of the PTLLS students within this survey showed that the youngest age of students during the three years was 21 and the oldest was 66. Overall, the data displayed an evenly-distributed age profile with slightly more younger learners (aged 21 to 30) than people over 50 years of age. This contrasts with an opinion survey of 40,000 FE and Skills Sector members conducted by the college teaching union UCU in December 2012 (UCU, 2013). The UCU received 400 responses to the survey and found that more than half of the respondents were over 50 years of age. Fewer than 5% of respondents were aged 21-30. This data could be a reflection of the UCU's survey methods or the willingness of members to take part.

The relatively younger age profile of the college PTLLS students (30% were under 30 years of age) is encouraging. Although this was a small-scale survey, the findings suggest that PTLLS (and its successor Award) could attract a new generation of teachers and trainers for the sector. On the other hand, the college age profile data showed that 44% of PTLLS students were over 40 years of age. It tended to be within this group that candidates cited a desire to change careers as their motivation for training to be teachers. The college data also showed an overall gender imbalance with more than twice as many female trainees (71%) as male candidates (29%). The UCU survey on the other hand showed an *'almost 50-50 split in terms of gender with 50.4% of respondents being men and 49.4% women'* (UCU, 2013: p. 3).

The research approach

Whilst this project was designed from the outset as a small-scale piece of empirical research focused on two core questions – “Why did you enrol on the PTLLS course?” and “What have you done since completing your studies?” – there was an awareness that the answers given by the cohort that had attended this college might be of interest to other Teacher Educators and indeed to a wider audience of ITT planners. Denscombe (2011) suggests that the value of taking a *'grounded theory'* approach to social research projects is that investigators can *'...gradually build up theories that emerge from the data'* (Denscombe, 2011: p. 107). It may be presumptuous to think that Teacher Educators should take an inductive approach to their research interests but unless there is a willingness to seek and interpret the opinions of student teachers there is a risk that policy-making in the LLS will continue to be a top-down affair.

At the start of each course during the three years of delivering PTLLS, student email addresses had been collected for the purpose of distributing course material and receiving assignments. The college managers agreed that if informed consent was received from the students, a questionnaire could be distributed by email as part of this research project. An online survey was chosen as the method of data collection because of the short timescales involved and because, as Denscombe recommends, *'...internet surveys provide a fast and cheap alternative to postal surveys'* (2011: p. 14). The college's Data Manager sent an explanatory initial email to the 106 former PTLLS students for whom email addresses had been collected. Four of the 106 email addresses bounced back as

being incorrect. The remaining 102 candidates were invited to email a reply to the researcher if they were willing to take part in the project which was carried out in August 2013 using an online survey tool, SurveyMonkey. This web-based research service is free to use for up to 100 respondents and is recommended by a number of authors. '*The whole process is easy and presents your respondents with a professional looking interface*' (Thomas, 2010: p. 181). An embedded questionnaire '*...is easier for the respondent to return to the researcher and requires less computer expertise*' (Bryman, 2008: p. 644). Denscombe highlights other advantages of web-based questionnaires including the display of responses onto charts and tables for the ease of analysis by the researcher (2011: p. 159). There is however a limitation of only ten questions with the basic SurveyMonkey service, but for this project that was sufficient. SurveyMonkey requires the researcher to confirm that they have the permission of all the candidates before the survey web page hyperlink can be issued to the email addresses supplied.

A total of 31 candidates from the 102 validated email addresses eventually volunteered to take part in the survey. A response rate of 30% is regarded as providing meaningful and valid data for social science research projects (Tymms, 2012: p. 236). Although this was a self-selecting group of research participants it was noted that there was at least one representative from each of the ten cohorts of PTLLS students that formed the original survey population. A reminder was issued to 12 non-respondents after five days and this increased the response rate, an expectation cited by Denscombe (2011: p. 21).

The ten questions of the survey were presented to participants, and focused on the two core themes of the research project and also on other topics of current LLS policy interest. Some of these topics had previously been identified in a paper published in this journal comparing ITT delivered by Higher Education Institutions and other awarding bodies (Simmons and Walker, 2013).

Six of the ten questions asked the students the following:

- Who had paid for their PTLLS course fees?
- What was their motivation for enrolling on the PTLLS course and plans for the future?
- What were their personal career goals and their main occupation prior to PTLLS?
- Was the student new to teaching or not?
- What was their progress since achieving their PTLLS qualification?
- What support was available for professional status within the LLS?

The college was particularly interested to know if there was a need to offer a higher-level teacher training qualification to its former PTLLS students and one of the ten questions focused on this market research topic.

There is a limited opportunity for in-depth qualitative data to be collected using such an online survey tool but five of the multiple choice questions presented were designed so that respondents could (and did) make additional supporting comments. It is intended to involve the PTLLS participants in further research, including interviews and focus group discussions. Students who volunteered to take part in this survey will be sent a copy of the overall research findings and will be invited to take part in future research to follow their teaching career development.

Within eight days of the survey being issued a total of 29 responses had been received (93% of the volunteer group). The gender split of respondents (72% female and 28% male) was very similar to the college's overall PTLLS student population which further enhances the generalisability of the data.

Survey findings in relation to national policy

One of the key arguments put forward by the government for the deregulation of FE teaching qualifications and an end to mandatory Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in the LLS has been that high performing colleges would want all their teaching and training staff to undertake appropriate qualifications and CPD as a matter of course. In *'freeing colleges from central government control'* (BIS, 2013) the onus would be on college managers to allocate training budgets that meet the needs of their staff and their organisation's strategic priorities. A number of commentators have questioned this approach given the tightening of public sector finances and a reduction by one third in the adult skills budget since 2010 (Association of Colleges, 2013). Hillier and Appleby predict that *'a minimum level of ITT will become the norm'* (2012: p. 12). The authors also point to the government's own evaluation of Lord Lingfield's interim report (BIS, 2012c) where concerns were expressed that *'...some teachers...were not being supported to go beyond PTLLS'* (p. 11). One of Simmons and Walker's interviewees (Karen, Pennine College [2013: p. 28]) specifically referred to the cost implications of ITT when making course selection decisions. The PTLLS student survey data reported here shows that 28% of respondents had paid their own fees, whilst a significant number of candidates (66%) had their course fees paid by their employer (mainly education providers). However, although the survey indicates that a number of former PTLLS students (21%) had progressed to higher level teaching qualifications (Level 5), the majority of participants in the survey (55%) had *'not yet progressed further with teacher training'*. Three of the respondents (10%) indicated that they had achieved an Assessor Award.

Another area of current debate has centred on the motivation that people have for studying for an Initial Teaching qualification. The teachers in Simmons and Walker's investigation cite a number of reasons why they enrolled on ITT programmes. Some *'...were required to enrol'* by their local authority. One said she *'...was directed to do so by her employer'*. There are references to planning *'...to change career in later life'* and teaching being *'...an add-on to her main role'*. One of the Simmons and Walker interviewees simply wanted to obtain *'...some sort of teaching qualification'* (all 2013: p. 26).

Most Teacher Educators agree that PTLLS has been the recognised threshold qualification for entry to the profession. The participants of this survey indicated a variety of motivations for study. Some respondents (21%) saw PTLLS as a stepping stone to a new career, whilst others (21%) were looking to add another string to their bow. The career transition motive seemed to be strongest amongst the six candidates who were *'self-employed'* when they joined the PTLLS course and amongst the four students who did not work for an education sector employer. It was noticeable that 15 respondents said that the PTLLS qualification was *'a requirement of their job'* and that the majority of the PTLLS respondents (52%) were already in service within the LLS (though not necessarily employed in a teaching or training role).

The Lifelong Learning Sector is currently making its next chrysalis-like transformation, adopting the recommendations of the Lingfield report (BIS, 2012d) and the *Guidance for Initial Teacher Education Providers* published by LSIS (2013). As PTLLS is replaced by *'a new preparatory award intended as a threshold licence to practise in FE'* (BIS, 2012c: p. 23), it is perhaps worth reflecting on whether or not the original PTLLS qualification has

achieved what it was intended to do. It would appear from the responses received to this survey that former PTLLS students of the college have indeed benefited from the experience. Prior to enrolment on the PTLLS course, only one of the respondents had a permanent teaching contract. Seven candidates (24% of respondents) indicated that they had achieved that career milestone since receiving their PTLLS award. Although two of the respondents said that PTLLS had convinced them that teaching was not for them, 83% of respondents stated that they now had a teaching role of some kind compared with 48% of respondents who had teaching experience prior to starting their PTLLS course.

The penultimate question in the PTLLS survey invited the participants to consider where they saw themselves in five years' time – a difficult question given the level of uncertainty within the LLS. Some leading figures within the sector have even questioned whether or not there is a long-term future for FE. The Lingfield report seemed to overreach its remit by suggesting that FE should focus exclusively on vocational education and that the eventual merger of Further and Higher Education could not be discounted. Hillier and Appleby are adamant that this is the true political agenda of the present administration (2012: p. 12). Certainly the language being used by the government in its recent publication – *Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills* (DfE/BIS, April 2013) – suggests that the LLS will be left to the vagaries of 'informed consumers' (2013: p. 34) and employer needs, along with reduced public funding and increased competition for what money there will be 'in the FE market' (2013: p. 34). The respondents to the PTLLS survey seem unperturbed by these political storm clouds. Their responses to the survey embrace a variety of personal ambitions. The most popular career path is teaching young people in FE colleges (36% of respondents), closely followed by a desire to train people in the workplace (28%). Teaching in community settings and in Adult Education Centres were also indicated as roles actively being pursued by the PTLLS graduates.

The college was greatly encouraged to learn that if there had been a higher level teacher training course on offer then 15 of the respondents would have been interested in enrolling on that course rather than looking elsewhere.

There are some policy statements that could give all in the sector cause for optimism. Aligned with the government's determination to remove '*...the culture of top-down bureaucracy and central planning*' (*Rigour and Responsiveness in Skills*, 2013: p. 6) is an acceptance that '*...lecturers and teachers in colleges deserve recognition*' (p. 7). The centrepiece of the government's strategy to help deliver professionalism for the sector will be the new Education and Training Foundation – initially recommended as the FE Guild by Lingfield at the interim stage of the Review Panel's work (BIS, 2012c) and accepted by the Minister of State for Further Education in the government's response (BIS, 2012a). This new organisation, set up with support from the Association of Colleges and the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, is tasked with ensuring standards and codes of conduct are maintained by the sector and its practitioners. It remains to be seen whether or not the Foundation can fully replicate the holistic role that LSIS adopted as the guardian of professional standards and practitioner qualifications. Certainly the PTLLS students seem to think it will. When asked at the end of the survey if they would '*support the setting up of a Guild to enable qualified teachers to achieve a professional status*' the overwhelming majority (65%) said yes.

Conclusions

The participants of this survey were all on the first rung of the ITT ladder and described their motives for taking this step. It was good to see from their responses that almost all

had used their PTLLS qualification to achieve a teaching or training role within the Lifelong Learning Sector.

There is perhaps another topic arising from the survey that could benefit from further enquiry. Whilst it is recognised that the LLS is diverse, so is its workforce. This survey seems to show that new entrants come into the industry at different stages in their lives and with different ambitions. Not all want to progress to higher levels of learning. Not all want to be college lecturers. The final version of the Lingfield report asks the FE Guild (the Education and Training Foundation) to discuss conditions of service of FE lecturers and the '*...proportion of permanent staffing below which it becomes difficult to sustain a comprehensive professional ethos*' (BIS, 2012d: p. 5). Hillier and Appleby are especially critical of what they observe to be an '*...overwhelming casualisation of the sector*' (2012: p. 12). However, it may be that just as the world of work is changing, with 4.1 million self-employed 'portfolio' workers in Britain (CIPD, 2012: p. 5), so new members of the LLS workforce may have other competing professional interests. The Lingfield report recognises this dual professionalism, drawing on the Canadian experience where college teachers '*...continue to work in their fields [to] remain current in their areas of [vocational] expertise*' (BIS, 2012d: p. 34).

Here is the dichotomy. If colleges and other providers continue to employ teachers on part-time and fractional contracts and yet burden them with full-time bureaucracy, new entrants may question whether working in the Lifelong Learning Sector will afford them the same professional status as their other vocations. The Education and Training Foundation has a key responsibility to enhance the professionalism of all its workers, especially those new to the industry, bringing with them such a varied and current set of expertise to offer students and employers. One way for the Foundation to stay in touch with the aspirations of new teachers and trainers is to routinely seek their opinions.

Meanwhile, it is to be hoped that the new Level 3 Award in Education and Teaching (the replacement for PTLLS) will continue to provide a threshold licence to practise in FE, a route towards a second career option, a springboard to Higher Education and an introduction to the wider social benefits of Lifelong Learning.

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