

# Trainee teachers in unpaid teaching posts: volunteering, risk and vulnerability

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# **Trainee teachers in unpaid teaching posts: volunteering, risk and vulnerability**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the experiences and perceptions of a little-known category of in-service trainee teachers in the FE and Skills sector in England: those who meet the practical teaching requirements of their course mainly through unpaid teaching as 'volunteers'. The paper reports findings from mixed-methods research which used surveys, interviews and focus groups involving trainee teachers within a large FE-HE partnership. Themes relating to motivations to volunteer, the development of teacher identity within marginal roles, and the risks associated with unpaid teaching are discussed. For increasing numbers of trainees, unpaid teaching provides an opportunity for career entry. However, the quality of teaching experience gained is mixed, with some trainees receiving high levels of support whilst others experience marginalisation and limitations on their developing teacher identities. The paper highlights the specific challenges to professionalism posed by unpaid teaching within the FE and Skills sector, and relates these challenges to a broader context of insecurity and risk. As work experience becomes an increasingly valuable commodity, this paper illustrates the pressures individuals face as they exchange payment and security for the opportunities volunteering provides.

**Key words:** teacher education; further education; risk; volunteering; unpaid teaching

## **Introduction**

The Further Education (FE) and Skills sector in England is characterised by a number of tensions. For many years, FE colleges have provided large numbers of young people and adults with technical and vocational education, alongside general education that has often been a 'second chance' to acquire academic qualifications not obtained at school. Adult and community learning providers have also played an important role, particularly in basic education. More recently, successive governments have positioned FE colleges as central to a project of lifelong learning through which individuals, their employers, and the nation may keep abreast of changing skills demands (Avis 2009). However, this provision has also been associated with negative stereotypes arising from the largely working-class nature of the occupations it serves, leading to low status and public images of a sector for 'other peoples children' (Richardson 2007). Although FE colleges are important providers of higher education, here too their positioning is as low-status institutions (Avis & Orr 2016). The demands upon FE colleges increased with the growth of marketisation in the 1990s and the intensive focus on education during the New Labour years (Lucas & Crowther 2016). Whilst some academic provision declined, new cohorts of students – particularly more vulnerable learners – entered their doors. Meanwhile, the number of private and charitable training providers grew, often catering for learners in challenging circumstances. Austerity measures

have increased the pressures on the FE sector and colleges are now coping with significant reductions in funding and the threat of closure or merger. Within this context, the challenges facing new teachers entering the sector have increased: employment is difficult to obtain, teaching practice placements may be scarce and mentors difficult to find. Moreover, systems of performance management and accountability may position trainee teachers as a risky proposition whose access to courses with 'high stakes' assessment must be carefully managed.

Initial teacher education (ITE) for FE is conventionally divided into in-service and pre-service routes (Avis, Fisher and Thompson 2015). Because a teaching qualification is not required for entry to teaching in the sector, it is possible to obtain paid employment in a college or other provider and then train as a teacher by part-time study. This in-service route accounts for around 70% of ITE provision for FE (ETF 2015; 2016a). Pre-service routes, normally full time, are also available. Typically, pre-service trainees<sup>1</sup> are provided with a placement by the institution at which they study, and undertake periods of unpaid teaching practice to acquire their qualification. However, a third and less well-known route exists, occupying an uncertain position between in-service and pre-service provision: people who teach on an unpaid or 'voluntary' basis can also access in-service teacher education programmes for FE.

This volunteer route is not new, and for many years unpaid teaching has been accepted by ITE providers as a basis for undertaking an in-service programme. At one extreme, often associated with large charities, volunteer trainees have been well-integrated into the organisation. Such trainees may differ very little from paid teachers, and may have greater security than teachers working on a part-time hourly paid basis. At the other extreme, however, unpaid teaching has been used as a substitute form of teaching placement, nominally transforming a pre-service trainee into an in-service teacher. In recent years, some ITE providers have encountered a shift towards the second extreme, with increasing numbers of trainees needing to access ITE programmes through volunteer teaching (Robinson and Rennie 2012).

The reasons for this situation are varied, and relate to the tensions in the FE sector described above. Long-standing insecurities in the professional status of the FE workforce have been thoroughly documented (for example, Gleeson, Davies and Wheeler 2005; Gleeson and James 2007; Thompson and Robinson 2008). However, more recently specific pressures have stemmed from the combined effects of austerity, de-regulation and marketisation within FE and Skills and in higher education. Competition between ITE providers had been increasing for many years, but was offset during thirteen years of Labour Government by a regulatory approach which boosted overall trainee numbers. However, in the period after 2010, this situation was destabilised by three factors: increased university tuition fees and changes to the funding of FE students; removal of the requirement for FE teachers to acquire a teaching qualification; and cuts to FE funding which reduced the availability of paid teaching posts. Overall, these factors have considerably reduced trainee numbers, leading some providers to withdraw whilst those remaining face intensified

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<sup>1</sup> Over the last decade, ITE programmes have become increasingly influenced by Ofsted, the body responsible for their inspection. Many institutions now refer to their student teachers as 'trainees', a term which is adopted in this paper.

competition. Furthermore, for potential trainees full-time study may be less palatable financially, leading to increased motivation for new teachers to enter FE through a part-time route. Although part-time pre-service courses exist, pressures to accept unpaid teaching as a basis for in-service ITE have increased.

Changes to funding and the rise of 'volunteer' teaching may also be seen as a product of broader societal changes, as work becomes less secure and governments seek to reduce state commitments by individualising social risk and transferring the costs of education to its recipients (Simmons and Thompson 2007). Moreover, work experience is now a sufficiently valuable commodity that those seeking entry to an occupation may be willing to work without pay in order to acquire it (Duguid et al. 2013). Whilst structures such as class, gender and race remain relevant, their effects are increasingly being experienced and managed in individual rather than collective ways. Phrases such as 'self-entrepreneurship' and 'choice biographies' are used to describe the continual re-formation of the self occasioned by changing socio-economic circumstances (Bauman 1988; Giddens 1991; Beck 1992). From this point of view, increased use of volunteering to support career entry (or change) can be understood as a response to the risks posed by complex social, political and economic circumstances.

Although significant numbers of nominally in-service volunteer trainees exist within the FE and Skills sector in England, little is known about these trainees and their experiences. There have been studies of post-qualification volunteer teaching in Canada (Pollock 2010; Pearce and Pollock 2012), and of marginalised teaching in other countries and contexts (Morrison 1999); however, the work of Robinson and Rennie (2012) contains the most detailed discussion hitherto of volunteer trainees in the English FE system. The present paper reports on research into volunteer trainees in a large FE-HE partnership in the north of England, comprising a post-1992 university and around 20 partner FE colleges. The research was funded by the partnership and aimed to answer questions concerning the nature of the volunteer trainee cohort, their outcomes, and the perceptions of trainees and teacher educators.

Participation in voluntary teaching may be largely instrumental, directed towards acquiring a teaching qualification rather than being a contribution to society or for personal satisfaction. It may therefore be preferable to refer to unpaid internship rather than volunteer teaching. However, the literature on volunteering encompasses a broad range of meanings, and benefits to the individual volunteer are not precluded. Furthermore, volunteering can be defined behaviourally, as acting to produce a public good, irrespective of motive, and is constituted by any activity that produces goods or services at below market rate (Wilson 2000, pp. 215-6). In any case, the term 'volunteer trainee' was embedded in the partnership and will be used in this paper. Three further terms used to describe research participants will also be explained. The term *ITE tutor* is used to describe teacher educators responsible for delivering the ITE programmes operated by the partnership. In each partner college a teacher educator was responsible for managing the ITE programme locally; this person is described as the *lead ITE tutor* (or *lead tutor* for brevity). Finally, a *mentor* is a teacher – usually within the institution where a volunteer trainee is teaching – who is responsible for supporting the trainee in the more practical aspects of the ITE programme. In general, the mentor will not be an ITE tutor.

## **Methodology**

The research used a pragmatic synthesis of qualitative and quantitative methods. Whilst the perceptions of trainees and their tutors require qualitative investigation, they need to be placed in a broader context of trainee demographics and achievement. The quantitative analysis also enabled us to enrich and refine the qualitative research, influencing the design of interviews and the range of participants sought. Firstly, an online survey was administered in the academic year 2014-15 to the lead ITE tutor in each partner college (20 lead tutors in total), dealing with trends in recruitment and outcomes for trainees. Because requests for detailed individual-level data would have been likely to reduce the response rate, lead tutors were asked for their impressions of whole-cohort data, rather than being required to calculate precise statistics. Although this reduced the capacity of the survey to capture fine detail, lead tutors were thought likely to have a reasonably accurate knowledge of trainee outcomes. Secondly, all in-service trainees in the second year of the programme were invited to complete an online survey in the second half of the academic year 2015-16, dealing with their personal backgrounds, experiences of the course and their anticipated performance. The second year was selected because these trainees would have greater experience of the course and of volunteer teaching. Volunteer trainees were defined as in-service trainees meeting the requirements of their ITE programme mainly through unpaid teaching.

Responses to the lead ITE tutor survey were obtained from 14 out of the 20 partner colleges. The total number of trainees in these colleges (including both first and second year trainees) was reported to be 618, of whom 162 were volunteer trainees. These trainees therefore represented 26% of total trainee numbers, compared with the 11% found for the same partnership in 2010-11 by Robinson and Rennie (2012). This proportion corresponded closely with an independent survey of recruitment across the partnership, which estimated that 25% of all trainees were in unpaid teaching posts. However, some centres did not respond to the survey, potentially affecting its representativeness. Responses to the second-year trainee questionnaire were obtained from 102 trainees in a total of 17 partner colleges, a response rate of 26% of the 398 second-year trainees in the partnership.

Qualitative research across seven partner colleges explored the perspectives of volunteer trainees, lead ITE tutors and mentors. Eleven individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteer trainees, one interview with two trainees and two focus groups comprising three and five trainees respectively. These trainees were currently in unpaid teaching posts or had been for a significant part of their course. The use of focus groups maximised the range of voices heard given the limited availability of trainees, who were usually accessed before or after ITE sessions. In addition to the trainee interviews, six individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with lead ITE tutors, one with a tutor who had been in a volunteer post whilst undertaking their own teacher training, and five with mentors. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

## Research findings

This section presents the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative research, beginning with the structure of the volunteer trainee cohort and motivations for volunteering. It then discusses a number of important themes relating to the interaction between the professional development of trainees and volunteer status, including vulnerability, participation in professional activities, and the transition to paid employment.

### *Structure of the volunteer trainee cohort*

The most basic aim of the survey research was to map the volunteer trainee group by course, age, gender, ethnicity and previous teaching experience. The breakdown of 2014-15 trainee numbers according to the lead ITE tutor survey is shown in Table 1. There was little difference between Cert Ed and PGCE in terms of the proportion of volunteer trainees, a finding also supported by the trainee survey. However, there was a substantial difference between Year 1 and Year 2. This may be because unpaid teaching can lead to paid teaching later in the course. However, the difference may also be produced by a year-on-year increase in the proportion of trainees with unpaid teaching, which would show up in Year 1 first. Furthermore, Year 2 contained a significant number of direct entrants with prior learning achievement, and these trainees may have been more likely to have paid teaching. The lead ITE tutor survey made no distinction between trainees whose teaching was wholly or partly unpaid; however, following initial analysis this distinction was included in the trainee survey.

	Total number of trainees	Number of volunteer trainees	Proportion of volunteer trainees (%)
Cert Ed Yr1	129	44	34
Cert Ed Yr2	154	25	16
PGCE Yr1	142	53	37
PGCE Yr2	193	40	21
Total Cert Ed	283	69	24
Total PGCE	335	93	28
Total Yr1	271	97	36
Total Yr2	347	65	19
Overall	618	162	26

*Table 1: Trainee numbers 2014-15, as reported by lead ITE tutors.*

In the survey of second-year trainees in 2015-16, 102 trainees responded, of whom 27 were in wholly unpaid teaching posts and a further 8 were teaching in mainly unpaid roles. Five trainees were undertaking some unpaid teaching within a mainly paid role. The proportion of respondents who were undertaking at least some unpaid teaching was therefore 39%, considerably higher than the Year 2 proportion reported by lead ITE tutors. This suggests that the notion of volunteer trainee needs to reflect the complexities associated with teaching employment that may combine paid and unpaid work over the period of training. In the remainder of this paper, unless stated otherwise we will include as volunteer trainees the 35

respondents who reported that their teaching was wholly unpaid or mostly unpaid with some paid.

There was a substantial gender difference, and 83% of respondents in unpaid or mostly unpaid teaching roles were female, compared with 51% of respondents in paid or mostly paid roles. This can be compared with data for the FE teaching workforce, where 65% are female (ETF 2016b, p.16), and for Cert Ed/PGCE courses in general, where 64% are female (ETF 2016a, p.43). The proportion of volunteer trainees from minority ethnic backgrounds was slightly higher than the proportion for the ITE programme as a whole, at around 14% compared with 10%. However, the small sample size precludes any reliable inference about the representation of minority ethnic groups in the volunteer trainee cohort.

The median age for volunteer trainees was 31 years, compared with 36 years for other trainees. However, there was a long 'tail' to the age distribution and many volunteer trainees were aged 45 or older. The volunteer trainee route therefore appears to be significant in terms of late career change as well as career entry, consistent with other research indicating that many entrants to FE teaching have extensive employment experience in other fields (Jephcote & Salisbury 2009). Although 27% of paid or mostly paid trainees had less than one year of teaching experience, this was well below the corresponding proportion for volunteer trainees (69%). Five volunteer trainees reported having four or more years of teaching experience. The great majority of all trainees had four or more years of work experience outside teaching, with 69% of volunteers and 85% of other trainees reporting this level of experience.

Most lead ITE tutors reported an increase in the number of volunteer trainees over the last few years, particularly in Year 1. Several tutors gave responses which drew attention to changes in the sector and in the economy more widely, for example:

There is a trend towards more volunteer teachers on the course ... Most tutors in FE colleges are already qualified and so there is a smaller number of new employees who need teacher training at the moment ... a number of tutors have been made redundant as college funding is cut back. [College A]

Lead tutors were overwhelmingly positive about accepting volunteer trainees onto the course, although one tutor reported that 'there have been occasional instances of volunteer trainees being used as free labour ... with insufficient support of their development'. In the survey responses and interviews, other ITE tutors strongly contested the idea that volunteer trainees were systematically being used to replace paid tutors (see Marcus 2012), although they acknowledged that trainees could need protection in this respect. However, whilst our evidence did not give strong support to concerns over the displacement of paid tutors, there is clearly potential for abuse of voluntary teaching. Given wider concerns about the prevalence of precarious work amongst paid teaching staff (UCU 2016), some of our data should be read in the context of long-term changes to the labour process of FE lecturers, including casualisation and work intensification (Mather et al. 2007).

Because of the lack of course data on achievement by volunteer trainees, alternative means were used to assess outcomes. These included the views of lead ITE tutors on achievement, based on their experience over several years, and the views of trainees. Six lead tutors felt

that retention and achievement of volunteer trainees were comparable with those in paid teaching, whilst five felt that these outcomes were worse for volunteers (one tutor reported that outcomes were better for volunteer trainees). However, the overwhelming majority of lead tutors (eleven out of 13 who responded to the question) reported that, amongst those who successfully completed the course, grade profiles were comparable between volunteer trainees and others. Amongst trainees, there was very little difference in expected outcomes, with 89% of volunteer trainees expecting to achieve Grade 1 or 2, compared with 91% of other trainees<sup>2</sup>. These findings can be seen as supporting the view of lead tutors that outcomes were comparable amongst those who completed the course. Overall, there was no evidence that voluntary teaching is fundamentally detrimental to trainee outcomes, at least for those who progressed into Year 2.

### *Becoming a volunteer trainee*

The literature on FE professionalism highlights the diverse and sometimes 'accidental' nature of entry to teaching in the sector (Gleeson, Davies and Wheeler 2005; Gleeson and James 2007; Jephcote & Salisbury 2009), although even accidental opportunities may acquire significance because of a long-held but perhaps dormant desire to become a teacher. Volunteer trainees shared in this diversity, with some taking a deliberate decision to gain a teaching qualification and looking for a post (paid or unpaid) to support this, whilst for others opportunities had 'cropped up' which triggered an imagined future as a teacher.

It was always something that I wanted to do ever since ... my second year of doing my beauty therapy ... I worked in salons and it got to the point where I thought 'I'm fed up working for minimum wages with anti-social hours so I'll go on to do something that will be, hopefully, better paid'. [Focus group participant]

There was no 'typical' volunteer trainee (Robinson and Rennie 2012). Their backgrounds were varied, and their teaching ranged across institutional types, including the voluntary sector, schools, the college where trainees had studied, and other FE and HE institutions. Individual trainees could also work in a number of these sectors, serially or concurrently. Some experienced a combination of paid and unpaid teaching. The overwhelming majority of trainees interviewed gave largely instrumental reasons for volunteering, and would otherwise have been unable to access either pre-service or in-service courses. As one participant said, 'If I wasn't doing the course I wouldn't be volunteering'. Although one trainee reported having begun volunteer teaching five years earlier after becoming unemployed, almost all those interviewed had obtained their unpaid posts when they commenced teacher training. Additional motivations included building up a profile of teaching skills and experience, consistent with research reported by Hustinx et al. (2010, p.351), which identified developing employability as a significant factor amongst younger volunteers. A focus group participant spoke of volunteering with the aim of finding paid work as being the norm amongst new graduates generally.

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<sup>2</sup> The achievement of trainees was graded according to the terminology used by Ofsted.



Although there were exceptions, volunteering was generally perceived to be associated with higher levels of support than paid teaching, providing an important motivation for becoming or remaining a volunteer trainee:

I was a volunteer for a year [in a college then] I was paid for a month and [now] I'm a volunteer again [in a secondary school] ... it just wasn't worth it because I wasn't supported in the same way as an NQT would be. If I ever asked a question they made me feel that I was bothering them ... I'd rather be in a position where I am supported ... [Tilly]

Volunteer trainees are, of course, engaged in their ITE programme for only part of their time. Most of those interviewed were in some form of employment, and although they acknowledged insecurity in the FE sector, teaching was often seen as a more satisfying and better paid alternative occupation. A few were unemployed, and were constrained by the requirements of job seeking and the benefit system. These external demands limited the time and energy that volunteer trainees could give to their ITE programme – thereby affecting the breadth and depth of their experience. This could cause difficulties in the mentoring relationship, with the trainee having little non-teaching time in college and email or telephone contact providing a less satisfactory alternative. However, in this respect volunteer trainees are not necessarily disadvantaged in relation to trainees with paid part-time teaching, who are also likely to have a range of other commitments, including paid work outside teaching.

#### *Vulnerability and volunteer status*

The circumstances under which volunteer trainees work were described by some lead ITE tutors as fragile, insecure and precarious – which perhaps reflects the nature of work in the FE sector but may also signal a more recent intensification in the labour process of beginning and established teachers, not only in English further education but in other sectors and countries (Hulme & Menter 2014; Charteris et al. 2017). One ITE tutor explicitly acknowledged that volunteer trainees could experience challenges specific to their status:

Voluntary staff are treated much less favourably in that they feel on the periphery of their communities of practice, and they are not included or they feel like they are not included. I don't think they see themselves as proper teachers and I don't think they are perceived by others as proper teachers but more like cover assistants or teaching assistants.

The informal nature of unpaid teaching arrangements meant that volunteer trainees could be vulnerable to sudden changes in student numbers, the redeployment of paid staff, or to the needs of examination classes. Both the lead tutor and trainee surveys suggested that issues of marginality disproportionately affected volunteer trainees, including insufficient teaching hours, restricted forms of teaching experience, and difficulty in obtaining a suitable mentor. Trainees were conscious that they were 'guests' in their institution, and the precarious nature of an unpaid post could incline them to accept more limited forms of participation:

The teacher has already chosen the units so I can't do anything about that and even if I have a different way of doing things I still have to do it her way ... at the end of the day, she is doing me a favour by letting me teach her group because if anything happens she is going to be responsible for it ... [Sheena]

However, no volunteer trainees reported experiencing serious problems in meeting course requirements, and whilst in the trainee survey 26% reported some problems, this was little higher than for other trainees (21%). This perhaps suggests that trainees and ITE tutors found ways to compensate for the challenges faced by volunteers, rather than that these challenges were insignificant.

Most trainees interviewed emphasised their commitment, 'professionalism' and the value they could bring to the host institution and its students. This commitment could represent a significant personal investment and a range of social and economic risks: in terms of intellectual and emotional resources, time, and financial outlay (for example, course fees, travelling expenses and potential lost earnings). Subsequent teaching employment could not be guaranteed, even on successful completion of the course. Some trainees expressed the view that they were owed certain obligations in return, particularly the continuity that would enable them to complete the ITE programme. Fear of losing a teaching position or having insufficient teaching hours to develop fully was common, based either on personal experience or the knowledge that this had happened to others. Although some trainees appeared to possess the resources to thrive on uncertainty, viewing it (at least in retrospect) as a test of resilience, losing a placement could have a lasting effect on the progress of those who could not readily secure another unpaid position.

I think it was because they had a few tutors off sick and so there wasn't anyone there to babysit me ... and I've stopped for five or six months without teaching. I'm not getting anywhere because I'm not teaching ... It's making me feel miles behind everyone else ... [James]

Whilst emphasising their own commitment, trainees understood that paid staff and students may see things differently, and expressed concerns that volunteers could be 'looked down on' and regarded as of lesser value than their paid colleagues. Although there were many instances of trainees receiving high levels of support, there were also occasions when trainees felt exploited, for example by being asked to take on difficult groups or to cover classes at short notice.

The idea that volunteer trainees should have similar rights to paid employees was explored most extensively in a focus group, where the presence of five trainees perhaps stimulated an exchange of views in which difficult relationships with mentors and insecurity in volunteer teaching positions were aired. These feelings of being undervalued and precarious were summed up by one trainee in the words: 'You shouldn't be disposable.' Conversely, the possibility of risk to the institution and its students could influence the mentor-trainee relationship and the development opportunities available. Gleeson et al. (2015) point out that performance management in colleges is now dominated by the all-important metrics of student achievement and lesson observation grades. Trainees were often insulated from classes near the beginning of a course or approaching important assessments, and some mentors were anxious to preserve their relationship with groups.

### *Participation, agency and identity*

Korhonen and Törma (2016, p.67) note that the formation of teacher identity involves both individually experienced processes and the ways in which the academic community and its culture socialise teachers and affect the possibilities of their development. The construction of identity thus consists of a personal identity process of *becoming*, in which an individual defines their relationships to action and the community and seeks to balance their own values with the expectations of others, together with a social identity process which involves participation in a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1999; Bathmaker & Avis 2005). One of the most striking features to emerge from the qualitative data was the extent to which the social identity process impacted on its personal aspect. The degree of participation – or of marginalisation – was linked to how volunteer trainees viewed their own status and identity. Certain aspects of participation initially appeared relatively trivial, but on closer examination were laden with symbolic and practical importance. How trainees were introduced to their classes, how they were accommodated in colleges, and the resources they accessed, could influence the experience of *becoming* a teacher, an issue also reported for pre-service trainees by Bathmaker & Avis (2005, pp.54-55). Together with opportunities to plan and conduct learning sessions, to manage student groups, and involvement in administration and course development, these affordances enabled volunteer trainees to share more or less productively in the collective experience of the host institution. Identity formation drew on a complex amalgam of authority, responsibility and status embedded within a specific volunteer teaching role, in a reciprocal relationship with the nature and depth of teaching experience.

Many trainees were encouraged to experiment and to stretch themselves, and acquiring more autonomy in the classroom was seen as a marker of professional development. Gradual increases in responsibility and close support from a mentor or class teacher were valued, and the opportunity to learn by reflecting on one's own experience appeared to be a crucial aspect of the volunteer trainee's journey. As their confidence and ability grew, so too did their independence and sense of identity:

I was given the opportunity to choose two learners ... I ended up marking all their work and doing their observations for their school placements and if they needed anything they had to come to me first ... I think I must have spent about twelve hours just going through one [portfolio] .... But I got there in the end ... [Focus group participant]

For the mentor also, supporting trainees could be a source of professional satisfaction – perhaps providing some counter-examples to the often negative experiences reported by Bathmaker & Avis (2005) and others.

The biggest thing is seeing her develop and a couple of weeks ago she came in at nine o'clock for an eleven o'clock session and ... it was buzzing ... she'd researched it and that was the first time that I really saw some developments in her and I could see her attitude growing as well. [Francis, mentor]

Limited autonomy appeared particularly significant in the context of classroom management, a point reinforced by trainees who had obtained paid employment and subsequently felt more able to assert authority as a teacher:

Well now I've got my contract and my paid hours I ... do feel more like I am a tutor now rather than a volunteer. I didn't have my teacher's badge until recently ... and I was just seen as one of the other students in most people's eyes, whereas now I think people recognise me as a tutor. [Sara]

Strategic compliance (Shain & Gleeson 1999) could also permeate the development process: 'I say to my trainees "Don't try and do it like me because you will fail on observation". When the observations come along I jump through the hoops like everybody else' [Lorna, mentor].

For a minority of volunteer trainees, responsibility was not necessarily seen as a bonus, particularly where it involved administration. Indeed, the idea of 'paperwork' – activities such as completing registers or official lesson plans, providing data for quality assurance systems, and maintaining assessment records – was often described in negative terms. For these trainees, volunteering meant less bureaucracy and more time 'learning how to teach'. In this respect, unpaid teaching enabled them to resist an aspect of 'becoming' where the positioning of the broader field of further education impacted on local learning cultures: the increasing demands of performative systems and the erosion of individual autonomy (Hodkinson et al. 2008; Bathmaker & Avis 2013). The implications of this attitude is that some volunteer trainees may take a self-limiting approach which excludes them from certain key elements of a teacher's role, retarding their development as teachers and making them less effective when they secure paid teaching.

I'd say as a volunteer you get to spend a lot more time with the students and working on practical aspects of the course ... I found a lot of the things that they do on a daily basis, like paperwork and things, you don't get to see that part of it because it is the main teaching thing that you do. [Focus group 1]

A recurring issue was how trainees described themselves (or were described) when meeting a new group of students. In some instances students and other staff members appeared not to be aware of their volunteer status. Whilst some volunteers had been open about the fact that they were trainees, others preferred to conceal or fudge the issue, afraid that it would detract from their authority if students discovered they were not a 'real' teacher.

Anxieties about managing classes and perceptions of isolation and lack of support are common amongst trainee teachers, not just volunteers, with particularly acute difficulties being experienced by pre-service trainees and trainees with paid part-time teaching (Bathmaker & Avis 2005; Orr 2012; Jameson and Hillier 2008). However, the situation of volunteer trainees appears to highlight these tensions, and to raise questions of equity with other trainees. Nevertheless, whilst many volunteer trainees expressed concerns about their own marginalisation, there was not the same 'overwhelmingly negative image of existing practice' as reported by Bathmaker & Avis (2005; p.56). A complex picture emerged from our data in which differing experiences of participation, autonomy and support were evident: the degree of integration perhaps related more to the attitudes of individual teachers and institutional cultures than to whether the trainee was paid or unpaid. Hodkinson et al. (2008, pp.31-32) argue that individual learning cannot be understood apart from the embodiment of the social in the individual, and their participation in the practices and relations of the institution: the local learning culture and its place in society more broadly. The diversity of

learning experiences we encountered may therefore be thought of as a product of specific individual, institutional and social circumstances.

#### *Agency and the transition to paid work*

The great majority of trainees considered paid teaching as their principal aim after completing the course. In the trainee survey, around two-thirds were seeking employment in FE or sixth-form colleges, with most of the remainder aiming for posts in a range of settings, including higher education, work-based learning and community education. Three respondents – one of whom had taught in the voluntary sector for several years and exemplified the ‘traditional’ volunteers referred to earlier – appeared happy to continue with voluntary teaching, although one hoped to combine this with paid work. In this respect, unpaid teaching appears to provide a reasonable probability of success. In the lead tutor survey, eight out of ten respondents said that more than half their volunteers have obtained paid teaching employment in a full-time or substantial part-time capacity. Only one reported that it was rare for this kind of progression to be achieved.

Throughout the interviews, trainees emphasised the value of volunteering as a means of obtaining experience, developing skills and exploring their preferences within teaching. Enhancing employability was an explicit aim for most of the trainees, and some deliberately sought out challenges, willingly taking on classes with a reputation for being difficult or extending the range of teaching they could offer:

What I’m trying to do at the moment is to challenge myself and look at different areas of teaching on a volunteer basis. There is somebody who has approached me in the last couple of months wanting me to go in and do some teaching on their behalf and that would be a new area for me. That would stretch and challenge me ... [Abigail]

Trainees were more ambivalent when it came to revealing their volunteer status to potential employers. Some trainees – and ITE tutors – believed that teaching unpaid would be interpreted as a sign of commitment to their new profession, although there was no concrete evidence for this. Others were more wary, anticipating that employers might be suspicious of a period teaching without pay. However, these views were united by a realisation that, if called upon, they could construct a positive narrative of their volunteering. Trainees also saw their volunteer teaching as an opportunity for the ‘long interview’ referred to in the literature on FE professionalism (see Gleeson, Davis and Wheeler 2005, p.405) – that is, the opportunity to showcase one’s strengths in the context of part-time teaching or a pre-service teaching placement.

Accounts of finding paid teaching often appeared in the interviews and focus groups, and some trainees reported knowing other volunteers who had done so. As with entry to volunteer teaching, personal contacts were important to trainees in finding paid work. However, rather than these being the result of chance, in certain cases unpaid teaching

provided access to a network of paid colleagues who would alert the trainee to opportunities, not only in the host institution but also elsewhere:

I saw [the job advertised] and [also] my line manager from this college emailed me and highlighted the job role and said had I seen it because it's a really good opportunity. I loved the team I was working in but there weren't any permanent positions. [Erica]

These stories are balanced by other volunteers who did not find paid teaching and also by the sometimes precarious and piecemeal nature of the work that was obtained. Nevertheless, trainees saw themselves as gaining valuable experience and building networks:

I don't think I would [apply elsewhere] at the minute because it is quite exciting here and we've gone through a major restructure and a major change and I think I'd be stupid to leave my current position because there are exciting things coming up. So I'm in a prime position at the minute and I don't want to lose that. [Rebecca]

However, the type of paid work to which volunteer teaching gives access may be available because of short-term staffing issues, situated outside formal, competitive appointment processes and therefore tending to be limited in extent, hourly paid and precarious. Some trainees expressed surprise at the lack of security in the FE sector, citing austerity and changing funding priorities as a major source of instability. Several ITE tutors reported that local colleges had been restructured recently, causing problems in availability of teaching opportunities, future employment and support from experienced colleagues. Such perspectives reflect the wider policy landscape affecting FE under Coalition and Conservative governments since 2010, including the closure of many vocational programmes, demand-led funding, changes to college governance, and overall funding reductions of 43% by 2018 (Lucas & Crowther 2016).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the challenges to professionalism arising from the situation of trainee teachers with unpaid teaching in the FE and Skills sector in England, drawing on trainee experiences within a large FE-HE partnership. In this partnership, the proportion of volunteer trainees had increased considerably since research conducted during 2010-11 (Robinson and Rennie 2012). This increase did not appear to be related to an increase in volunteer teaching *per se*, but to arise from a need for teaching experience and the lack of paid alternatives. Nevertheless, most trainees viewed volunteering positively, and regarded themselves as making a significant contribution. For some younger trainees, unpaid teaching was seen as almost inevitable, a parallel to the internships encountered in other occupations. For older trainees, volunteering provided the opportunity for career change, either following redundancy or as a decision to enter what was, for some, a more prestigious and better-paid occupation.

There was no evidence that achievement rates were lower for volunteer trainees who completed the course than for others; however, we encountered some concerns about retention in the earlier phases of the ITE programme. Although there was strong evidence

that many trainees were well-supported, the quality of teaching experience appeared to be lower for volunteers. Trainees' development could be limited by reduced opportunities to participate in a broad range of professional activities. Insecurity and vulnerability appeared to be common and some trainees did not feel that their commitment to the profession was reciprocated. At the same time, the views of mentors highlighted the issue of risk to the institution in an era of performance management and accountability. The potential for exploitation of volunteer trainees and their use to displace paid tutors clearly exists. However, apart from requests to cover classes for short-term absence we found little evidence of this. Unpaid teaching appeared to lead quite often to paid employment; however, this was largely part-time hourly paid and could be precarious.

Robinson and Rennie (2012) write of the situation of unpaid in-service trainees as 'testing the professionalisation agenda' and suggest that the backdrop of economic recession and consequent austerity measures may have increased the numbers of volunteer trainees. Without doubt, the recession has been an important factor, together with the political choices made in response to it. However, the further increase in volunteer trainees identified here indicates not only that the effects of recession are still being felt but also that broader social and economic changes may be responsible for a secular rather than cyclical phenomenon. Whether unpaid teaching by ITE trainees is a challenge to professionalism – the New Labour agenda of professionalisation being now largely defunct – is unclear. Even at the height of this agenda, authors such as Avis (2007, p.119) saw processes of de-skilling, re-skilling and up-skilling taking place concurrently. In our research, we observed a complex situation in which high levels of commitment by trainees, and of support by tutors and mentors, were present alongside instances of marginalisation. The 'complexity, contradictions and messiness' observed by Bathmaker and Avis (2005, p.61) are clearly still with us. Since 2010, approaches to FE professionalism have been transformed in a period of post-regulatory 'liberal conservatism' (Fisher and Simmons 2012). Competition, not collaboration, is seen as the driver of standards, and volunteer teaching can perhaps be seen as exemplifying a trend to more self-interested forms of volunteering (Duguid et al. 2013). In turn, such trends can be linked to the processes of individualisation identified by numerous authors since the late 1980s. Nevertheless, this does not mean that intending teachers are free to engage in their biographical projects unconstrained by social structures. Much of our data can be seen in the light of continued influences of class and gender on the FE workforce, alongside 'the impact of the new work order on existing communities of practice' (Bathmaker & Avis 2005, p.60).

If new meanings of volunteering are here to stay in ITE, what implications are there for the FE sector? At an operational level, ITE providers need to recognise that distinctions between in-service and pre-service trainees will become more blurred. This will necessitate different assumptions about trainees and careful supervision of their workplace learning. At the same time, deeper engagement of teacher educators with the volunteer workplace – particularly with mentors – will be required to ensure adequate support and that the opportunities and risks for both the trainee and the institution are understood. More profoundly, the position of volunteer trainees illustrates the continuing insecurity of communities of practice in FE. The socially and culturally situated nature of professional learning makes it unlikely to flourish alongside the casualisation and intensification of teachers' labour, de-regulation of ITE, and ongoing reductions in FE funding. Those most peripheral to a community of practice, including many of the trainees discussed here, are perhaps most likely to suffer. On the

other hand, these trainees are part of the future of FE; if their professional development is impoverished, the impact on the sector will be felt for many years to come.



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