

Gove's insistence on good degrees won't be enough to drive up teaching standards

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/02/17/gove-teaching-standards/?pfstyle=wp>

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As the Education Secretary plans to improve the quality of teachers by 'raising the bar' for entry into the profession, [Jonathan Clifton](#) argues that improving training opportunities for teachers already in schools is more likely to increase teaching quality than stricter recruitment drives.

Last week the head of prestigious Brighton College [waded](#) into the debate over how England selects and trains its teachers. Richard Cairns argues that A-level results, not degrees, would be a better measure of who will perform well as a teacher.

This [debate](#) has been sparked following government plans to improve the effectiveness of teachers by changing the way they are recruited and trained. They will raise the bar for entry to teacher training (a minimum 2:2 degree will be required); expand the Teach First programme for top graduates; and let schools run teacher training. Even the cuts to training programmes have been defended as focusing on 'quality not quantity'.

But there are three limitations of any approach which relies on improving the workforce through the recruitment of new teachers.

First, recruiting better teachers does not necessarily mean they will end up in the schools that need them most. Analysis of the data on [school spending](#) that was released in January reveals that underperforming schools spend larger sums on supply teachers. The top fifth of schools spent £67 per pupil on supply teachers in 2009-10, whereas the bottom fifth of schools spent £153 per pupil on supply teachers. It is well known that many underperforming schools have staffing problems – either struggling to recruit qualified staff or having to cover for staff absence. The challenge for policymakers is therefore not just to recruit good teachers, but to ensure those teachers make it in front of the pupils who will benefit from them most.

Second, [research findings](#) from Bristol University show that it is hard to identify who will make an effective teacher before they enter the profession. No matter how many degrees or psychometric tests the new recruitment system puts in place, it isn't until a teacher starts work in the classroom that it will become clear how effective they are. More attention should therefore be paid to monitoring performance and professional development of teachers once they have started work.

Third, the churn of teachers entering and leaving the profession means it could take decades for improvements to the recruitment of new teachers to filter through the system. Each year about ten per cent of teachers leave the profession and are replaced by new starters. Any approach that tries to improve the workforce through recruitment will therefore miss the ninety per cent of teachers who are already out in the classroom. The government should pay more attention to the development of existing teachers rather than the recruitment of new ones.

Improving the schools workforce will require more than the changes to recruitment and selection announced by the government. The challenge over the coming months will be to develop ways to improve systems for the professional development of existing staff, based around in-school mentoring and chains of schools partnering with each other. It will also require the government to grasp the thornier issue of performance

management, finding ways to monitor and improve performance within each classroom. But the biggest headache will be how to improve the distribution of teachers to underperforming schools. Making these schools more attractive to work in could require differential pay, training, or career development opportunities such as placements in industry and academia.

The Government's ambition to raise standards by making the schools workforce more effective should be welcomed. [Research by ippr](#) and others has shown the difference between an excellent and ineffective teacher is equal to one GCSE grade, all other things being equal. But it will take more than changing the recruitment of new teachers to drive up standards.