

Reflecting on Experiences of the Flexible (formerly the Alternative) Route to Full Registration

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Abstract

Although there has been a great deal of research into the impact of the Teacher Induction Scheme (TIS) since its inception in 2002, there has been little work done to evaluate the experiences of those who have followed the Flexible Route to full registration

Teachers may enter the Flexible Route for a variety of reasons. In some cases they are teachers who are eligible for the TIS but who find themselves unable to accept a placement on that scheme or who choose to follow the Flexible Route for personal reasons. Most other participants are teachers who are not eligible for the TIS as they trained outside Scotland.

In 2008 GTC Scotland conducted a survey of all teachers who had gained full registration by this Route between its establishment in 2002 and the end of March 2008. The survey had two main aims: to assess the experiences of probationer teachers on the Flexible Route and the extent to which these prepared them for work as fully registered teachers; and to evaluate the extent to which those experiences compared with those of probationers on the TIS. Did probationers receive appropriate levels of support from their schools and local authorities, and from GTC Scotland? Did their experience contain adequate supporter meetings, classroom observations and CPS opportunities? In what ways could the structure of the Route be enhanced?

The paper will share the outcomes of the survey and offer some reflections on potential implications for policy and practice.

Paper

The Flexible (Alternative) Route to Full Registration

When the Scottish Teachers' Agreement of 2001, reached in response to the McCrone Report, *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century* (SEED 2001), established the Teacher Induction Scheme (TIS) for those eligible to join it, it became necessary to review the arrangements for the probationary service of those who did not participate in the Induction Scheme. Prior to this period, all teachers had served a probationary period equivalent to two years' full-time employment, and received full registration at the end of this period on submission of a positive recommendation from the Head Teacher of the school in which they completed their probationary service. There was, however, no coherent or structured approach to this experience, with probationers being highly dependent on the goodwill and capacity of the school to provide any support they required. Nor was there any common understanding of the standard that teachers had to reach in order to qualify for a

recommendation for full registration. The creation of the Flexible (then entitled Alternative) Route to full registration was an attempt to address these issues.

Crucially, it provides a basis for the judgement of the Head Teacher through the requirement to reach the same Standard for Full Registration (SFR) (GTCS 2002, revised 2006) that applied to those following the Teacher Induction Scheme. It also regulates the length of teaching service required, which is a maximum of 270 days, though that can be reduced depending on the circumstances of the individual, and requires the teacher to engage in a relevant programme of continuing professional development (CPD).

As its name suggests, the Flexible route provides a range of ways in which teachers can complete their probationary service: through supply teaching or temporary contract work in state funded schools; through teaching in Scottish independent schools; through teaching service outside Scotland; and through service in non-mainstream establishments.

Teachers may enter the Flexible Route for many reasons. Probationary teachers eligible for the TIS may choose to opt out of that scheme, for example because they are not available for full-time work. Teachers who trained outwith Scotland are not eligible for the TIS, so any probationary service they need to complete to obtain full registration is carried out on the Flexible Route.

Background to the Research

The TIS has been the focus of considerable research activity (eg Draper *et al* 2004; Robson & Pearson 2004, 2005; Clarke *et al* 2007; Hulme *et al* 2008; Matheson & Hulme 2009), but there has been little work done on evaluating the Flexible Route. As GTC Scotland is responsible for the operation of the Flexible Route, it has a keen interest in obtaining insights into the experience of those who followed that route. Such insights are of value to the Council in identifying ways in which the Route can be improved and in identifying policy issues that require to be addressed. This research, conducted in the spring of 2008, had the purpose of evaluating the levels of support received by teachers who have achieved full registration through the Flexible Route to inform developments in policy and practice with a view to enhancing that experience.

Methodology

All teachers who had obtained full registration through the Flexible Route between its establishment in 2002 and March 2008 were invited to participate in a survey. Those for whom GTCS held email addresses (2428) were sent emails with links to an online questionnaire, with those for whom GTCS had only postal addresses (1578) were sent paper questionnaires, the responses to which were entered into the same online software to aid processing of data. In total there were 350 responses. Though this represents a disappointing 8.73% return rate, the number of responses was still large enough to provide valuable evidence about the range of experiences of teachers on this Route.

In designing the questionnaire, the researchers sought to test the extent to which the Flexible Route experience replicated that of the TIS. Accordingly, the questionnaire contained sections relating to the service of the participating teacher, the nature of the timetable, the provision of supporter meetings and observed teaching sessions and participation in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities. Additionally, we asked about the nature of the probation experience, including the encouragement of reflection and enhancement of classroom practice, and about the levels of support provided by schools and, where relevant, local authorities. Most questions took the form of statements with which respondents were asked to "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree" or "strongly

disagree". There was no neutral option. At the end of each section there was an opportunity for those expressing disagreement to discuss their reasons in a free text response.

Outcomes of the research

Quantitative data

Of the 350 responses, 147 came from primary teachers and 201 from secondary teachers, with two teachers not providing information on their sector. They covered a broad age spectrum, with 40.3% aged 21-30, 28.3% aged 31-40, 18.6% aged 41-50 and 11.4% aged 51-60. 1.1% did not respond to this question. Perhaps reflecting the inclusion of significant numbers who had trained initially outside Scotland, over half of the respondents had qualifications other than B Ed primary or PGDE.

Teachers were asked to indicate the number of schools in which they had served during each year of their probationary service and to give the average length of their teaching posts. Table 1 reveals a mixed picture, with a minority of respondents having short-term or supply contracts involving working in many schools (in a few cases very large numbers), but more commonly teachers serving in one or two schools in a particular academic year. Between 60% and 70% reported average lengths of post of at least seven months (two school terms), though there was a slight tendency for contract lengths to fall after 2004.

Table 1 – Probationary service

a Number of establishments (schools, colleges or other places of work) worked in

Number of establishments	Number of teachers					
	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8
1	81	85	104	132	121	94
2	5	15	19	20	19	16
3	5	2	9	8	4	7
4	1	3	6	5	7	4
5	4	1	8	5	5	2
6 - 10	3	4	2	3	5	1
11 - 15		2		3	3	
30			1			
40				1		
50					1	
61						1
Unspecified ("several", "various", "supply", "too many to count")	5	3	3	4	6	5
Total number of respondents	104	115	152	181	171	130

b Average length of teaching post

Length of post	Number of teachers					
	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8
Up to one week	3	3	0	1	0	1
Less than one month	1	1	2	4	3	3
One to three months	4	6	10	7	14	5
Four to six months	10	10	19	22	18	18
Seven months to one year	41	54	61	86	82	54
More than one year	29	21	29	39	36	28
Unspecified (supply)	5	3	6	2	4	3
Unspecified or varied widely	1	8	14	11	5	4
Total number of respondents	94	106	141	172	162	116

Evaluating the experience

Questions about the various aspects of the probation experience explored issues relating to supporter meetings, observed sessions and CPD experiences, as well as asking for reflection on the probationary experience overall. In almost all cases each individual statement drew about 260 responses.

Supporter meetings

Twenty three respondents indicated that they either had no mentor or supporter at all or that, where they worked in several schools, such support was provided only in some schools. Often, teachers on a series of short term contracts or on supply were not in schools for long enough to develop a mentoring relationship. Some respondents went further, saying that they were classed as non-induction or regarded as “just supply” therefore told that they were not entitled to formal support. In a few cases, schools appeared to be unaware of the requirements of the Flexible Route.

Table 2 – Responses relating to Supporter meetings

Statement	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total Responses
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	
The frequency of supporter meetings was appropriate	68	25.8	96	36.4	50	18.9	50	18.9	264
The focus of each supporter meeting was pre-defined	55	21.0	106	40.5	53	20.2	48	18.3	262
Discussions at supporter meetings were helpful in my development as a teacher	85	32.4	110	42.0	26	9.9	41	15.6	262
Clear actions were defined at the end of each meeting	71	27.1	111	42.4	35	13.4	45	17.2	262
Supporter meetings were well structured and collegiate	69	26.3	104	39.7	43	16.4	46	17.6	262

Although over 60% of those responding felt that the frequency of supporter meetings was appropriate, only just over a quarter met fortnightly or more frequently, which implies that many respondents did not perceive a need to meet as regularly as this. However, some teachers reported that even where they had a mentor or supporter, they had no, or very few, supporter meetings. Often, teachers noted that as they were teaching full timetables, or as their supporters or line managers were under pressure themselves, any meetings were held at lunchtimes, after school or “squeezed into times when the mentor and I were free”. There could also be practical difficulties for schools in providing this type of support in cases where the teacher was employed to provide short term supply cover.

Where mentoring support was provided, respondents' experiences varied widely. Almost 75% of respondents found supporter meetings valuable in their professional development, with two-thirds of them agreeing that the meetings were well structured and collegiate and 70% that they defined clear actions. There could be debate as to whether this is a source of satisfaction or of concern, as between a quarter and a third of probationers disagreed with these statements, suggesting that practice is far from consistent and that some schools do not provide Flexible Route probationers with the support they need. A few respondents noted that, all though they had access to mentors, the mentors were not sure of their role and appeared to have had little or no training.

Among those who provided open responses, some found the support provided to be weak and haphazard, feeling that they were burdens on the school, while others described the support from Head Teachers, other members of Senior Management Teams or Principal Teachers to as excellent. Even where formal support was limited or absent, twenty two respondents said they received valuable informal support and advice from Head Teachers, Principal Teachers or other colleagues.

Observed sessions

As with supporter meetings, three quarters of respondents felt that they had an appropriate number of observed sessions from which they received clear, specific feedback, though slightly fewer agreed that the focus of each observation was pre-planned. Over 83% found the experience helpful in developing their teaching abilities.

Again, this leaves a significant minority who did not receive this type of support. Such respondents often reported that they were not seen as a priority for the school as they were not "real" probationers or that it was difficult to fit in observations during short stays in a school. Typically, they said that they only had observed sessions either as part of general school observations or to assist with completion of the final probation report. A small number expressed their frustration that observations had been organised and subsequently cancelled or that the observer had simply failed to turn up.

CPD experiences

Again, about three quarters of respondents agreed that programmes provided by local authorities and schools met their CPD needs in a balanced way, with slightly fewer agreeing that their activities matched specific areas of the SFR. However, a significantly lower proportion, just under half, agreed that the targets in their career entry profiles were used in planning CPD activities. Some probationers graduated before such profiles existed or came from overseas, but ten respondents stated that no-one looked at their career entry profile, while a few stated that they did not contain relevant targets anyway.

The open responses reveal that the greatest frustration shared by many respondents was that, because they were not on the Teacher Induction Scheme, they were not permitted to attend probationer CPD events arranged by their local authority, except in a few cases where these were twilight sessions. Though in some cases this was because they were on full timetables and schools were unable or unwilling to release them (especially when on supply), others felt that it was another example of their being treated less favourably than those on the TIS – one commented "Felt ostracised from other probationers".

The probation process

As table 3 illustrates, in common with the previous sections, about three quarters of responses were positive, suggesting that the process enabled majority of probationers on the Flexible Route to reflect on their practice, enhance their classroom skills and teach a

varied timetable. The minority who did not find the process assisted them to achieve this progress was, however, significant.

Table 3: Responses relating to the probation process

Statement	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Total Responses
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	
The probation process encouraged, and provided opportunities for, reflection on practice	54	20.5	137	51.9	41	15.5	32	12.1	264
The probation process encouraged, and provided opportunities to enhance, my classroom management skills	67	25.4	133	50.4	32	12.1	32	12.1	264
The probation process provided opportunities for me to teach a suitably varied timetable	79	29.9	116	43.9	39	14.8	30	11.4	264

The open responses reflected both of these types of experience. Some clearly found it a very valuable process, commenting that exposure to a range of classes equipped the probationer with confidence and skills or that teaching in a variety of schools offered a depth of experience and the opportunity to see a range of good practice. One even remarked that it is a more realistic process than the Teacher Induction Scheme, as it reflects more closely the reality of teaching as a fully registered teacher.

More common, though, as might be expected in an open response section inviting additional comment by those who disagreed with the statements, were negative reactions. There were frequent references to being “thrown in at the deep end” and to being treated as an ordinary member of staff, not as a probationer. One commented that “schools cannot be bothered with Flexible Route probationers, especially short-term contracts”, a theme that recurred in responses throughout in the survey, particularly among those whose experience had been largely of supply work.

Among those whose probationary experience largely comprised supply work, there were numerous references to schools seeing the participants “just” as supply teachers, with their probationer status secondary and even a burden for the school. This was summarised by one respondent who wrote,

Schools calling for an emergency supply teacher do not want to have to mentor and observe her, when she’s probably only there for a day or two. Some schools have turned me down because I was a probationer

and they wanted a supply teacher for a couple of weeks and didn't want to bother with me.

Some teachers said simply that the teacher received no support or was treated as an ordinary member of staff, not as a probationer. Others went further, recording actual refusals to provide support because, as non-induction or supply teachers they, in the words imputed to one head teacher, "didn't warrant any support". Such views gained support from a teacher trained in England who said that "some schools view probationers as less than competent or a nuisance, rather than as trained professionals".

The overall experience

Of those who responded, just over half rated their overall experience as excellent or very good, but still one in four rated it as poor or very poor. Respondents rated support from schools (65.1% excellent or good) and from GTC Scotland (58.7% excellent or good) much more highly than support from local authorities, which received good or excellent ratings from 45.3% of the respondents and poor or very poor ratings from one in three.

As before, the open responses provided a wide range of views. Some probationers on the Flexible Route felt that schools and local authorities regarded them primarily as cheap supply cover or as "ordinary" teachers rather than as probationer teachers who needed support. There were further comments about lack of awareness of the Flexible Route, one alleging that a local authority officer said the probationer was "entitled to nothing as a supply teacher first and a probationer second", while another was of the opinion that the Flexible Route is seen by schools as a second class route, schools being unwilling to take responsibility for supply teachers who may have only brief periods of service. There were also examples of probationers who had served in more than one school and found they received very different levels of support in different schools.

Overseas qualified teachers

Some of those who identified themselves as coming from, or training in, a country other than Scotland had particular difficulties to overcome. In some cases these related to complaints about the handling of their cases by officers of GTC Scotland, though some of these were based on misunderstandings of the role of the Council or on its powers. For example, complaints that GTC Scotland officers "did not understand" the system in England in some cases seemed to be based on an expectation that transfer of registration should be automatic regardless of the nature of their English qualifications and experience. Others complained that the process was too lengthy and bureaucratic, or that GTC Scotland gave insufficient credit for teaching experience in their countries of origin, leading to very long probationary periods. One summed up the process and "not easy or welcoming" and "felt like I was trying to take a job from someone who was 'more' entitled to it as they had trained in Scotland". By contrast, others described the assistance and advice they received from Council officers as helpful and supportive.

Some made suggestions for improvement of the system. One felt it would have been beneficial for people from outwith Scotland to have a briefing on the McCrone agreement so that they knew the hours they were required to work and on the outlines of the Scottish curriculum, especially the 5-14 guidelines. A similar thought occurred from a teacher who had found difficulties in grasping the Scottish education system because of the nature of supply work. This respondent thought that an induction period for overseas qualified teachers would give more consistency to their development.

Conclusions – implications for policy and practice

There can be no doubt that the Flexible Route is a lottery for probationers. There are two elements to this: the number of schools in which the probationer served and the level of support provided by schools and local authorities regardless of the length of service. This support can be seen as “arbitrary and inconsistent depending on the institution where they serve their probationary time”, as one teacher from the USA described it. To an extent, this is unavoidable, as some probationers have long-term posts enabling them to complete their probation in a single school, while others have a mixture of experiences that may include a series of short term contracts or erratic supply work. However, it is surely unsatisfactory that access to support should be so much a matter of chance. To address this issue, it would be valuable for GTC Scotland and its stakeholder partners to review the arrangements and requirements of the Flexible Route, in order to maximise the benefits of the process.

The inconsistency referred to above is reflected in respondents’ descriptions of attitudes towards them at school or at local authority level. While many recorded their gratitude to colleagues or head teachers for their support, a significant minority reported great difficulties in this area, with forty nine making specific reference to such issues in their open responses. It may be worth debating whether probationers on the Flexible Route should have some form of specified entitlement to support, and if so what that might entail. At least it would be helpful to have clear guidance for schools and local authorities to ensure more consistent provision of support for teachers following the Flexible Route. Where they do not already do so, it might be particularly helpful for each local authority to identify a named person responsible for Flexible Route participants.

Where support was offered, probationers in general found that the supporter meetings and observed sessions were of value in developing their skills as classroom teachers, though a few referred to uncertainty on the part of some mentors as to their role. This suggests that in some schools people who have not been supporters in the TIS may be fulfilling this role for Flexible Route probationers, and it may be appropriate for GTC Scotland to remind local authorities of the need for training before someone takes on this role in either context.

Finally, there is a need to support those entering the teaching profession in Scotland from outside in understanding the Scottish educational system. Especially where they gain experience through supply work, it could take some considerable time for someone from other countries to come to terms with Scottish working conditions and the Scottish curriculum. It would, therefore, be valuable at least to prepare a briefing document outlining the key features of the Scottish educational system and major policy initiatives and perhaps to offer some form of induction to assist teachers moving to Scotland from other countries.

Although this was not the intention in devising the requirements of the Flexible Route, there exists a perception among many Flexible Route probationers that the process discriminates against them. The facts that most of them teach full timetables, often have less access to CPD opportunities, formal mentoring support or classroom observations than participants in the TIS, yet are paid at the same rate, produce understandable resentments. Actions such as those recommended above might help to provide a more consistent experience for those following this route in the future.

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