

A single Admissions Process for Postgraduate Initial Teacher Training – consultation document

Introduction

This response is submitted on behalf of GuildHE and Universities UK (UUK) and draws on specific input from the **UUK/GuildHE Teacher Education Advisory Group**, as well as members from across the two organisations. The submission includes an executive summary along with detailed responses to each of the questions.

Higher education institutions delivering Teacher Training are diverse, but all provide a high-quality teaching and learning environment. Their diversity is a good thing for teacher training in this country: it enriches the choices available to students, and has ensured a healthy balance of routes into teaching for students with different needs and strengths. Our response seeks to reflect this valuable diversity in teacher education provision, and the range of perspectives held by our members

Executive summary

Given there are a wide range of routes into Initial Teacher Training (ITT)^[1], there is a need to support the principle of transparency in terms of all the options available for potential applicants. This is essential in ensuring genuine choice for all applicants, allowing students to select the route that is most appropriate for them. In light of this it is clear that there could be benefits to reviewing how the process for application to teacher training could be simplified for the applicant.

However, members from UUK and GuildHE would not support the model proposed.

UUK and GuildHE would urge UCAS to take account of the following points for which there was strong support across respondents:

1. The restriction of applications to two mainstream and two GTP programmes which would **limit applicants' flexibility of choice, particularly in relation to traditional and popular ITT providers** and could result in fewer applicants receiving their first choice. Applicants would only be able to choose two GTTR providers. This is important as currently approximately 90% of applicants apply for mainstream and it is these providers that train the majority of teachers. Furthermore, not all applicants are suitable for GTP.

The proposed model using parallel applications could result in **introducing increased costs, redundant transactions and inefficiencies into the system**

^[1] The Postgraduate or Professional Graduate Certificate in Education [PGCE], school centred initial teacher training [SCITT], the Graduate Teacher Programme [GTP], the Registered Teacher Programme [RTP], Overseas Trained Teaching Programme [OTT], TeachFirst and in future SchoolDirect.

for both the applicant and providers. Applicants may believe that they need to apply to positions that in reality they would be highly unlikely to take up, resulting in more interviews and generally creating an additional burden for them. An increase in applications will result in an increased workload for providers, through more interviews and an increase in the number of offers of places that might not be taken up.

Before there are any changes to the current processes we feel strongly that further work is required and should focus on ensuring that any future model improves the experience for the applicant, supports student choice and supports increasing efficiencies for providers.

Given the majority of the applicants currently apply through GTTR we would also ask that this factor in terms of volume is taken into account when considering the creation of a single admissions system.

We also ask that in reviewing other models consideration is given to reviewing whether all ITT routes other than those outside GTTR (PGCE, and SCITT) and GTP would continue to remain outside the system and be able to recruit as they wish (as would appear to be the case with the current model). If this is to be the case then the benefit of a single process and portal would be reduced

Besides its failure to support applicant choice and to create a more efficient system overall, the proposed model appears to be driven primarily by a government strategy for ITT, which is currently untested and does not reflect the realities of current student demand, and whose impact on students, providers and teaching training provision are currently unknown. It is too early to tell what the admissions needs of the future system will be, and the proposals do not allow sufficient time to devise a process that will be fit for purpose.

There are some improvements that would deliver more clarity and choice for applicants which can be taken forward independently of any wholesale change to the overall admissions model, by working with providers to deliver continuous improvement.

However, the evidence-base for the proposed model is limited, and a more robust evidence-base is needed if genuine consideration is to be given to the benefits for applicants and the potential efficiency gains. We would suggest that in evaluating any future models it would be appropriate to develop some case-studies to look at the potential impact on a variety of providers before any decision is taken on a final model.

Introducing hasty changes, with insufficient regard for the evidence and for the current and future needs of students, is likely to end in costly failure. Teacher training is too important to the future economic and social success of the UK to take such a risk.

Answers to specific questions

12.7.1 Advantages of a single admissions process for GTTR and GTP courses

As a general principle there was support for a single admissions process and a single portal:

- This would provide a central point of information for applicants.
- A joint system has the potential to make the process more transparent for providers, however, this will not occur if the applicant is allowed to stagger their applications as would appear to be the case in the proposals.
- This would give equal profile/access to the different routes of teaching and responds to the way in which some applicants approach applying for ITT by wanting to consider both PGCE and GTP programmes.
- The current diversity of routes means it is confusing for applicants, particularly in terms of finding information about each route and to be able to distinguish the most appropriate route into teaching for them.

12.7.2 Disadvantages of a single admissions process for GTTR and GTP courses

However, some of the benefits as outlined above would be reduced if:

- all ITT routes other than those outside GTTR (PGCE, and SCITT) and GTP were to continue to remain outside the new model/ system
- some applicants felt compelled to use all four choices and apply to both routes even though they may only wish to apply for one route. (Evidence from the UCAS main scheme suggests this behaviour is likely.) From an applicant's perspective this could be inefficient: firstly, because the GTP route is very specific and not suitable for all applicants, and secondly, because an applicant would be required to undertake more interviews. From a provider perspective, if applicants do behave in this way, this could result in an increase in the volume of applications for the same number of places. It may also be the case that some of these applications will be for places for which an applicant may be highly unlikely to take up; making the process less efficient and more costly for providers.

14.8.1 A single application would secure a better overall applicant experience

For the reasons noted in 12.7.2 it is not clear that this would necessarily be the case.

14.8.2 Features within a single admissions process which would support applicants in selecting the most appropriate route into teaching

The model might simplify the process for applicants if comprehensive information is provided through a single portal, whereby information on all the different routes into teaching was pulled together. However, it is important to note that bringing information together and the admissions process can be seen as two separate activities. The former relates to information, advice and guidance and the latter to the application process itself. Having information in one place does not necessarily mean that a single admissions process has to be implemented, particularly given the short time scale for implementation by 2014.

14.15.1. A single application form would be able to give different providers all the information that they need.

Agree. A single application form could increase simplicity and transparency for applicants. In order to be efficient, it would need to capture the additional information that is currently provided for GTP applications by the TDA, and all information would need to be automatically available to providers. To benefit applicants, a single application form would need to be tailored to all schemes, however, we note that some schemes are excluded by the consultation (e.g. Teach First) and the consultation does not provide any detail on the content of the application form. Also, any changes would need to recognise that GTP applicants are often career changers and may have less formulaic experiences that may not fit easily into an application form.

If parallel applications are introduced, it may be useful to give consideration to allowing multiple personal statements.

14.15.2. Access to test results would be of value to providers.

Strongly agree.

14.15.3. The centralised interviewing planning facility would aid efficiency and help streamline the process.

We recognise that this proposal could provide benefits to applicants, but the consultation document does not provide any real evidence that interview arrangements are a significant problem at present. Currently our view is that institutions operate efficient and effective interviewing systems and there are benefits of doing this at a local level. Therefore while the benefits of a centralised administration system for interviews are unknown, the proposal would reduce the level of flexibility for many providers and create risks around the robustness of the decision-making process and timetable. There could be advantages in an optional system for some providers, but it is hard to see how a mixed model would deliver efficiencies and benefit applicants.

Where ITT provision is a small part of overall provision, a centralised interview scheduling may result in an additional burden and demand shifts in other processes.

Given the expectation of closer schools involvement in the selection process, a better way of ensuring effective interview planning could be through supporting continuous improvement in partnership-working between schools and HEIs. This would support a more efficient interviewing process without the need for a costly centralised system.

It is also unclear whether UCAS has the capacity and expertise to manage the interview scheduling and administration of tests. However, there could be benefits for applicants in centralising responses, and while the proposed model does not deliver sufficient benefit,

further exploration of models that could advantage students while not burdening or adding costs to providers may be helpful.

14.15.4. My institution could be adequately prepared to move to a single admissions process for year of entry 2014.

TEAG represents a number of providers which will have submitted their own responses to the consultation. We note that a longer lead-in time would ensure that preparations are adequate if a single process is introduced. The proposals in this consultation lack sufficient detail for institutions to begin preparing for any change.

Also, the broader scale of reform and uncertainty in the education sector at present is huge and these proposals would add another significant layer to this. The impact of these proposals on planning and student number management is unknown, and no impact assessment has been provided. Moving too quickly could create unnecessary risks for the supply of both teacher training and other higher education provision. It is too early to tell what the admissions needs of the future system will be, and the proposals do not allow sufficient time to devise a process that will be fit for purpose.

14.15.5. For school based courses, how could UCAS incorporate application processes that meet the needs of both providers and schools?

Applications could be made direct to HEI partners. Also, it would greatly support the application process if allocations of places were provided before the cycle opens – although we recognise that this is not within UCAS's control.

15.13.1. It would be an improvement for applicants to allow parallel applications in Apply 1.

There are advantages and disadvantages to the proposal. It is vital that the admissions process gives applicants the ability make choices that are appropriate to them. Parallel applications provide simultaneous choice and transparency of options, which could have a beneficial impact on applicants who are flexible about their preferred institution or route. However, many applicants have clear aims when they apply and do not wish to use both GTP and PGCE routes, therefore for them, choice is severely restricted. The clear intentions of so many current applicants indicates that transparency on the available options is not currently a problem. The vast majority of teachers currently take the GTTR route and having only two choices on each route could leave many applicants disappointed in Apply 1 without reducing demand pressures at later points in the cycle.

Reducing to only two applications for PGCE and two for GTP could also force individual applicants to consider routes that are not desirable, necessary, or appropriate for them. To provide genuine choice for applicants, it would be better to allow four applications via any route. This would allow all applicants to pursue the options that are best suited to their needs. Under the model proposed in the consultation, choices are likely to be used but wasted, which would make the system less efficient, and may be distracting for most applicants with no real benefit to them.

On balance we feel the proposal moves in the opposite direction from current policy, which emphasises enhanced student choice in a more marketised system. No strong evidence-base is provided to indicate that the proposal would support genuine student choice, or whether all providers have the capacity required for it to succeed. The risks to applicant choice, student retention and successful training, and the stability of teacher training provision more generally are very significant.

There are particular concerns around well-qualified applicants who receive less effective information, advice and guidance. Evidence shows that these students are concentrated in particular social groups.

Clear and centrally accessible information and guidance are essential to ensuring all applicants understand the system.

One advantage over sequential applications is that applicants who are unsuccessful with their preferred choice will not be faced with closed courses when they apply. However, this advantage is offset by the reduction in the amount of choice open to applicants, and will not get around the problem of bottlenecks for priority subjects.

It is not clear from the consultation what evidence is driving this proposal and the number of choices for each route (two) seems to have been arrived at arbitrarily. Without further evidenced modelling, it is difficult to see the possible net positive impact on applicants taking up places, or on applicant choice, compared to the current, sequential system.

15.13.2. It would be an improvement for providers to allow parallel applications in Apply 1.

Disagree. We recognise that the proposed Apply 1 system attempts to deliver more choice to applicants at an earlier stage in the cycle; we have outlined above where it fails to achieve this. From the provider perspective, it simply shifts the administrative burden, increases the overall size of that burden, drives up costs, creates a risk of processing bottlenecks, and creates wastage from applications that students have no real intention of pursuing. Direct consequences of removing the sequential route would be: more interviews, more processes, and more transactions at more points in the cycle, and more wastage.

The proposed system does not support the current DfE policy around priority subjects. The reduction in initial choices means that fewer highly-qualified applicants will shift their applications towards priority subjects before the later Apply 2 stage. By this time they may already have secured a place on (and be lost to) non-priority subjects.

To reduce unnecessary and costly processing of redundant applications, it would be helpful to have an optional facility whereby applicants who had already been successful could withdraw further unwanted applications.

Given that some schemes (e.g. Teach First) remain outside of the proposed system, it will not necessarily support effective planning or number management, and there will be less transparency.

15.13.3. Sequential application is the best approach to Apply 2 for applicants.

Agree. Since sequential application would be compatible with course closures by providers (see question below), transparency around this would help applicants to refine their choices.

15.13.4. Sequential application is the best approach to Apply 2 for providers.

Agree. This could help institutions to manage their allocation targets and could streamline the burden – provided course closure remains an option, which is essential for planning purposes.

There is some concern that the proposed Apply 2 stage is too long, with significant resource implications. This concern would be exacerbated if applications need to be processed within 35 days (see question below). These two pressures at once, at a time of shrinking resource and wider reform, would create risks to stability.

15.13.5/6 What is your view of four choices in Apply 1, a maximum of two PGCE and two GTP courses? Will this give applicants sufficient flexibility and choice?

Difficult to tell. A better model would be to let applicants decide on the routes that suit them. We have outlined above a number of strong arguments against restricting choices to two per route, which will lead to fewer applicants receiving offers from their first choice and add to the burden and wastage for applicants and providers.

For most applicants the proposed system will appear unnecessarily complex, since they can reasonably be expected to have thought hard about their choices and the route they want to take before they come to apply.

To ensure the system is as efficient as possible, it may be useful to look further at options for reducing the overall number of choices to three. We note that the UCAS Admissions Process Review found evidence of redundant choices in the main UCAS scheme. Where region of study is an important factor in applicant choice, a larger number of applications may be unnecessary and will merely add processing burden for institutions.

Some schemes (e.g. Teach First) appear to be entirely beyond the scope of the consultation document. Fairness for all applicants is a fundamental principle in admissions: it would be important to ensure applicants to schemes outside the scope of the consultation do not benefit unfairly from more choice than other applicants.

The proposed system does provide a single central point of information for applicants which could be helpful for them. However, this could also be achieved under other models.

16.11.1. A 35-day working day response period from providers is still too long.

Strongly disagree. A 35-working day response rate for providers is unrealistic, does not take account of the large volume of applications received by the most popular providers, or the general complexities of interviewing and decision-making. The pressure would create new risks around the way applications are considered and processed. The closer involvement of schools in the application process will also add to time pressures. It would be better to seek efficiencies elsewhere and to look at ways of enhancing transparency for applicants.

16.11.2. A 10-working day response period from applicants would be acceptable.

The response time for applicants could be reduced to five days, which with the cooling off period will give them ten days. This should be manageable for applicants who have taken their choices seriously and thought hard about them before submitting their application and in the period between application and receipt of offer.

16.11.3. It is right to give applicants 45 working days from initial submission of an application to firm acceptance of an offer.

This relates to our answers to the previous two questions. Applicants are likely to have thought hard about their choices before submitting their application as well as while they await providers' decisions. The length of the application period for teacher training is not normally out of step with that of other postgraduate applications.

16.11.4. It would be difficult to reduce the use of Stops and the time taken to address the issue which made the Stop necessary.

Agree.

16.11.5. It would help providers to have visibility of all applications.

TEAG members have mixed views on this proposal. While there would be clear advantages to institutions, it has also been remarked that applicants may be concerned that this visibility would prejudice their applications. Although this concern would be misplaced where institutions adhere to the principles of fair admissions, it could be advisable to look at how the issue of visibility is being treated in the main UCAS scheme.

We note also that since some schemes (e.g. Teach First) remain outside the proposed system, not all applications for all types of course would be visible so the final level of transparency would be variable.

16.11.6. A centralised administration system for interviews would streamline the process to help providers meet the deadline.

See our answer to question 14.15.3.

16.11.7. Measures to support school based providers in managing applications

As mentioned above, managing admissions through, or in association with, HEI partners would help providers to manage applications.

In the interests of transparency, clear information about the number of places available on different programmes would help applicants. It will also help applicants to flag the existence of the Apply 2 stage so that they are aware of their options.

16.11.8. If providers have significantly different application periods can the sector manage the process of finalising numbers?

There is some support for aligning an application to the TDA timetable.

17.9.1/2. Does the model deliver a simpler process for application to teacher training and if not what could be done to simplify the process?

As shown in answers to question 12.7.2, 15.13.1, 15.13.5, we do not believe that the model proposed would deliver a simpler process for applicants. There is also the issue that a number of routes such as Teach first and Schools Direct appear to continue to remain outside the system.

It was also noted that having confirmation of allocations prior to the opening of the recruitment cycle in October would improve the process for both applicants and providers. This would enable admission staff to advise applicants more effectively and provide a clearer and more transparent process.

17.9.3. Would the single system achieve a better match of applicant to course and a higher calibre of applicant?

There is no evidence to suggest that this would occur in either case.

17.9.4. Should the proposals be taken forward?

Not in their present form. We would urge UCAS to undertake further work with providers (perhaps this could include a working group with a representative sample of providers) to explore how the admissions process for postgraduate teacher training could be improved for both applicants and providers. This should also include risk assessment and the development of some case-studies to look at the potential impact on a variety of providers before any decision is taken on a final model. It is too early to tell what the admissions needs of the future system will be, and the proposals do not allow sufficient time to devise a process that will be fit for purpose.

It is also very important that, alongside this consultation, parallel consideration is given to the process for allocating places, as well as to improving that process. The application process should support providers in accurately meeting their targets. Providers need full, up-front information to manage entrant numbers, and the proposed model would simply not work if allocations for different routes are given at different times.