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Authored article

## HMCI's monthly commentary: February 2016

From: [Ofsted and Sir Michael Wilshaw](#)  
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Ofsted's Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw comments on the growing 'brain drain' of classroom talent overseas fuelling teacher shortages in England.



In his last [Annual Report](#), Sir Michael Wilshaw suggested that teacher shortages were being exacerbated by an increasing number of teachers choosing to work abroad. In his latest monthly commentary, Ofsted's Chief Inspector examines this phenomenon in more depth and asks what can be done to persuade teachers to stay in England's state school system.

England has a serious teacher recruitment and retention challenge on its hands. As a nation, we are simply not attracting enough new entrants into the profession and those we do attract are not applying to schools where they are needed most.

This is having a detrimental impact on schools right across the country but particularly those located in more deprived, unfashionable and isolated areas. Nearly three-quarters of heads leading disadvantaged schools who were polled last year for an Ofsted survey told Her Majesty's Inspectors that they were struggling to get good staff.

What's more, the daunting challenge of matching teacher supply with demand will only become more acute in the coming years as a result of rising pupil numbers.

We have to act now to address this growing imbalance. If we do not, all the well-intentioned reforms to school structures, curricula and assessment regimes, of this and previous governments, will be undermined. A school, and a school system, is only ever as good as its teachers.

The signs are far from positive. Earlier this month, the National Audit Office reported that the government had missed its recruitment targets for the past 4 years. As a result, an increasing number of training places were going unfilled in all but a handful of subjects taught at secondary level.

Now we know that teacher recruitment in an improving economy has always presented a big headache for schools and politicians alike. Indeed, there have been problems recruiting enough teachers for certain subjects, such as science and mathematics, for as long as I can remember. However, what is compounding the challenge for today's headteachers is the growing number of teachers coming through the training system but then opting not to take up jobs in our state schools. While some are moving straight into the independent sector here, it is apparent that a growing number of recently trained and newly qualified teachers (NQTs) are flocking abroad to work in the rapidly expanding international school sector.

Anyone regularly perusing the job vacancy pages of the education press cannot help but notice just how many of our elite public schools are busy opening up international branches across the globe, especially in the Gulf States and the Far East. Two years ago, there were 29 of these overseas franchises. At

the end of 2015, there were 44 and the number will rise again in the coming months with several new campuses scheduled to open soon.

Famous institutions like Harrow, Marlborough, Shrewsbury and Brighton College – to name just a few – are clamouring to meet a growing demand for a ‘traditional’ English education among the burgeoning middle classes of these countries as well as the increasing number of British ex-pats who have relocated there.

It would seem that my plea of a couple of years ago for our top independent schools to put more effort into supporting the education system closer to home – “more Derby, less Dubai” as I put it then – has not been heeded.

The current vogue among these prestigious institutions for establishing branches in far-flung corners of the world is just part of a much bigger worldwide boom in international schools in recent years, with UK companies dominating this lucrative market.

Given that the English language is by far the most common medium across the estimated 8,000 international schools and that many of these institutions follow a British style curriculum, it is no surprise that demand for UK-trained teachers is soaring. In 2014–15, there were thought to be 100,000 full-time teachers from the United Kingdom working in international schools – making us the world’s biggest exporter of teaching talent.

Indeed, last year, an International School Consultancy survey found that the number of teachers leaving the United Kingdom to teach in English language international schools (18,000) was higher than the number who qualified as teachers through the traditional post-graduate training route (17,000) in England. Although it is of course the case that not all of them will have left a teaching post in the English state school system or have full Qualified Teacher Status, this is still a remarkable and worrying statistic.

This demand for UK-trained teachers is only likely to increase. According to research by the ISC, the number of international

schools is projected to nearly double to over 15,000 by 2025.

Recruitment agencies are actively targeting both newly qualified teachers and more experienced classroom professionals from this country, with enticing offers of competitive, usually tax-free salaries, free accommodation and often the prospect of working in warmer, sunnier climes.

If all this wasn't enough to tempt your average debt-laden NQT, a rule change a few years ago now allows some of them to complete their induction overseas.

This, in itself, could prove problematic for those who do eventually decide to return to the English state school system. All my experience as a teacher and headteacher has convinced me that for NQTs, the continuum between their initial teacher training, induction and first few years of teaching is crucial. This is when teachers learn most about their chosen craft. It is why Ofsted, as part of its inspection of schools, now assesses the effectiveness of the support, mentoring and professional development in place for those at the early stage of their teaching careers, particularly in dealing with issues like pupil behaviour.

I worry that if newly qualified teachers spend the first vital few years of their careers overseas, particularly in institutions that may place little value on continuous professional development, they won't have this secure foundation. They may miss out on the type of opportunities to hone and improve their practice that are available to those who have been teaching in the English state system from the outset.

Of course, there is no denying that the boom in British companies opening and operating international schools abroad is pouring money into the Exchequer and helping with our balance of payments. It also plays its part in enhancing our reputation overseas. Indeed, education has become part of the government's GREAT Britain marketing campaign to raise the profile of home-grown brands abroad.

From a short-term economic perspective, this is undoubtedly a

positive thing. However, shouldn't we also ask the question: at what cost to our own state education system?

Are we in danger of overlooking one of the consequences of this expansion – a teacher 'brain drain' from this country just when the supply issue is reaching situation critical?

At a time of well-documented shortages, should we not be putting more effort into holding on to those who have gone through their teacher training in England? After all, let's remember, much of this training is subsidised by the taxpayer in the form of bursaries.

In my last [Annual Report](#), I suggested financial incentives could be better targeted in order to get trainees to start their career in the areas where they are needed most. As far as I'm concerned, that means Barnsley not Bangkok, Doncaster not Doha, and Kings Lynn not Kuala Lumpur.

I agree with those who say we should be doing a better job of talking up the teaching profession in this country and raising its status. After all, in many ways, there has never been a better time to teach in the English state school system. The facts speak for themselves. More than 8 out of 10 schools are now judged to be good or outstanding, while pupil behaviour has generally improved. Teachers, for the most part, are better supported and have better promotion prospects than ever before.

Of course, things are not perfect; but, we need to be as candid about the successes of the state system as we are about its problems. We need to hear more about the nobility of teaching, the impact that it has and the particular rewards derived from improving the chances of children from poorer and more difficult backgrounds – far greater, I'd argue, than teaching the gilded off-spring of the Chinese or Qatari ruling classes.

It is also important that the government gains a better understanding of the scale of the exodus of teaching talent abroad as well as its causes. At the moment, official figures are hard to come by.

What we do know is that many school leaders here are increasingly looking beyond these shores to make up the teacher shortfall. Indeed, the Department for Education recently launched a campaign to attract overseas teachers in the STEM subjects to England.

While this is an understandable and perhaps necessary step, it again raises the question of whether those plucked straight from the classroom in Australia, Jamaica or Portugal are as well-equipped to cope in an English state school environment as their home-trained contemporaries.

Talking to headteachers who have recruited from abroad to plug vacancy gaps, it is clear that some overseas teachers adapt quickly to the new demands placed on them. However, there are others who find it difficult to get to grips with the particular culture of English schools and our curriculum, assessment and examination regime.

This is one of the reasons why we should start focusing more attention on ways to curb the outward flow of home-trained teachers as part of an overall strategy to ensure that future supply keeps pace with demand.

There is, I would suggest, a moral as well as a practical dimension to the argument in favour of doing so. We should at the very least ask 2 fundamental questions:

Is it fair that the offspring of overseas oligarchs are directly benefiting from UK teacher training programmes at the expense of poor children in large parts of this country?

Is it unreasonable to ask someone who has been trained in our system to make a contractual commitment to teach in that same system for the first few years of their career?

I would, therefore, once again urge policymakers to consider the idea of some form of 'golden handcuffs' to keep teachers working in the state system that trained them for a period of time.

For those who question why such an arrangement should apply to teachers when it doesn't apply to other professional groups,

my answer would be: well, perhaps it should.

We all recognise that education – like so much else – has become a globalised commodity. So I am not suggesting we should try to place unreasonable constraints on English-trained teachers exercising their right to teach wherever they want to in the world.

However, all the signs are that teacher shortages in England will continue to present a major challenge for the next decade, at least. It would therefore, in my view, be unwise to bury our heads in the sand over this issue. As a nation, we can ill afford to entrench inequality or widen the gulf between the haves and the have-nots any further.

Our school system in England has made great strides forward in recent years. Unless we begin to think more creatively and more radically about how to recruit and hold on to our teachers, I fear that all these improvements could be undone.

People are the most precious resource in any system, but in education this is especially so. We need to demonstrate to our teachers through action as well as words that their country needs them and that it values the job they do.

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