

When “more” isn’t better: rethinking recruitment success in Initial Teacher Training

“What are your numbers looking like?”

In ITT, this is rarely a neutral question. It is asked by neighbouring providers comparing recruitment across a local area, by governance boards monitoring the progress of the current cycle, and often by ourselves as we measure against previous years’ figures. What appears to be a simple enquiry can carry considerable weight, bringing uncertainty about how to respond and anxiety about how the next cohort is shaping up.

All providers want sustainable cohorts and secure programmes. Recruitment matters; financially, organisationally and reputationally. Following a particularly successful cycle last year, we began September 2025 with our largest ever cohort of trainees. Our governance boards were understandably delighted, and so were we. It felt like affirmation that our provision was valued and that our partnership and recruitment work had been effective.

However, recruiting record numbers does not only bring benefits.

Initially, the pressures were practical. We had to reconsider how whole-cohort training could function when numbers increased significantly: ensuring trainees could meaningfully participate, hear presenters and engage in discussion required changes to how we used our training space and resources. Yet these logistical challenges quickly highlighted a more important question – not how many trainees we could recruit, but how many we could support well.

We have always seen ourselves as a relational provider: one where trainees are known as individuals and where support can be responsive rather than procedural. As numbers grew, we began to reflect on whether expansion risked eroding what made the programme effective in the first place. Beyond a certain point, growth does not simply stretch logistics; it stretches relationships, and relationships are central to professional learning and the success of our provision.

This raises a wider issue for the sector. Recruitment figures are often treated as a proxy for success, yet effective Initial Teacher Training is fundamentally capacity-dependent. High-quality training relies on mentor expertise, time and sustained partnership with schools. Increasing cohort size inevitably increases the demand placed on placement schools and on the colleagues who support trainees day-to-day.

Providers do not operate in a neutral environment. Recruitment figures influence financial viability, partnership stability and sometimes perceptions of quality. In a competitive landscape, a smaller cohort can feel risky even when pedagogically appropriate. The result is a subtle tension: providers may feel incentivised to maximise recruitment while simultaneously knowing that training capacity, particularly mentoring and placement capacity, is finite. This is not a matter of reluctance to grow, but of balancing sustainability with professional integrity.

More trainees require more placements and more mentors. While schools are generous in their willingness to contribute to the profession, additional demand risks diluting the support trainees receive. We know that the placement experience – particularly mentoring quality and a sense of belonging – is central to trainees developing confidence, competence and commitment to teaching. Where support becomes stretched, the risk is not simply weaker training, but weaker retention.

Mentor capacity is particularly significant. High-quality mentoring requires time, expertise and professional confidence. When cohorts increase rapidly, providers often need to recruit new mentors quickly. While many colleagues are enthusiastic and committed, mentoring is a skilled practice that develops over time. Expanding too quickly risks placing pressure on both mentors and trainees, with mentors managing competing classroom responsibilities and trainees receiving a less consistent experience. The issue is not willingness from schools, but the practical limits of professional capacity.

Cohort size also shapes the trainee experience itself. In smaller groups, trainees more readily ask questions, share concerns and seek support early. As cohorts grow, anonymity can increase. Some trainees participate less, and emerging difficulties may take longer to identify. Early teacher development depends heavily on confidence and belonging; where trainees feel known, they are more likely to persevere through the inevitable challenges of learning to teach.

This distinction matters. Recruitment addresses entry to the profession; retention sustains the workforce. If expansion outpaces the system's mentoring and relational capacity, then increasing trainee numbers alone cannot solve teacher supply challenges.

As providers, we therefore face a careful balance. Growth can support sustainability, but only if it remains aligned with the conditions that enable trainees to succeed: strong partnerships, manageable mentor capacity and meaningful professional relationships. For us, a larger cohort has prompted valuable reflection. Rather than viewing recruitment simply as a target to maximise, we are beginning to see it as something that needs to be carefully balanced.

National conversations often focus on how many teachers we recruit each year. Equally important is the environment into which those trainees enter. If training is experienced as supportive, coherent and relational, new teachers are more likely to remain in the profession. Recruitment is therefore only the first stage of workforce development, not its solution.

The more important question for the sector may not be "how many trainees did we recruit?", but "how many trainees did we support well enough to remain in teaching?"

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