

Briefing: Teachers' Job Quality Before and After the Pandemic: First Findings

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Executive Summary

- **Teachers' work intensity is significantly higher than for other professional workers, and teachers' job quality had been deteriorating in the years before the pandemic.**

This new research shows that:

- **After the pandemic teachers' job quality has remained unchanged, but that of other professional occupations has improved, thus widening the gap.**
- **Teachers' job quality is worse in schools where teachers are expecting a school inspection within one year, and in schools located in areas of social deprivation.**

1. Introduction

Research undertaken before the pandemic showed that the job quality of teachers in Britain had been declining in two key respects for a number of years. First, their work was becoming much more intensive, meaning that the rate of their physical or mental input was increasing, just in order to cover their required workloads. By 2017, nine out of ten teachers were strongly agreed that their jobs required them to work very hard. This compared with only half of other professional workers. Second, they experienced reduced discretion about how they did their jobs and reduced control over their working time.¹

With conditions harsh during the pandemic for everyone, it was nonetheless hoped that after the lockdowns jobs could be reset, especially with more people working at least partly at home. However, the option of hybrid working is rarely available for those working in schools. Other than having the additional burden of helping pupils to catch up for lost learning, teachers' work life after the pandemic was therefore expected to return to 'normal'. However, recruitment of new teachers has, unfortunately, not reverted to 'normal' levels. The number of new entrants in England to Initial Teacher Training is down by about a fifth on its pre-pandemic level.² With poor job quality thought to be behind problems of teacher recruitment and retention, it is important to track what has happened to teachers' jobs.

New research into teachers' job quality after the pandemic has been commissioned by the National Education Union (NEU) from Cardiff University, and UCL. The aim was to find out how, if at all, the job quality of teachers has changed since before the pandemic began. This briefing presents the first findings from this research. The full findings will be presented in a report later in the summer.

2. The Methods

The research has followed two complementary methods. First, use is made of a job quality quiz, in which roughly 100,000 working people answered a brief series of questions about their jobs. Half completed the quiz in the period leading up to the first pandemic lockdown (from July 2018 to January 2020) and half thereafter (from May to August 2022). The

¹ Green, F. (2021). "British Teachers' Declining Job Quality: Evidence from the Skills and Employment Survey." *Oxford Review of Education* 47(3): 386 - 403.

² McLean, D., J. Worth and H. Faulkner-Ellis (2023). *Teacher Labour Market in England. Annual Report 2023*. Slough, NFER.

proportions were adjusted using weights, so that they were representative of all working people. The quiz collected data from 6,841 teachers and teaching assistants. The respondents answered a set of questions about their job quality, which have been validated in previous studies.³

Second, in collaboration with the NEU the researchers conducted a survey of NEU members, covering teachers, headteachers and teaching assistants. The survey, which elicited 15,584 responses (including 13,350 teachers and leaders) used the same questions as for the job quality quiz but also included some additional items. Furthermore, information from the membership database enabled researchers to compare responses from different groups.

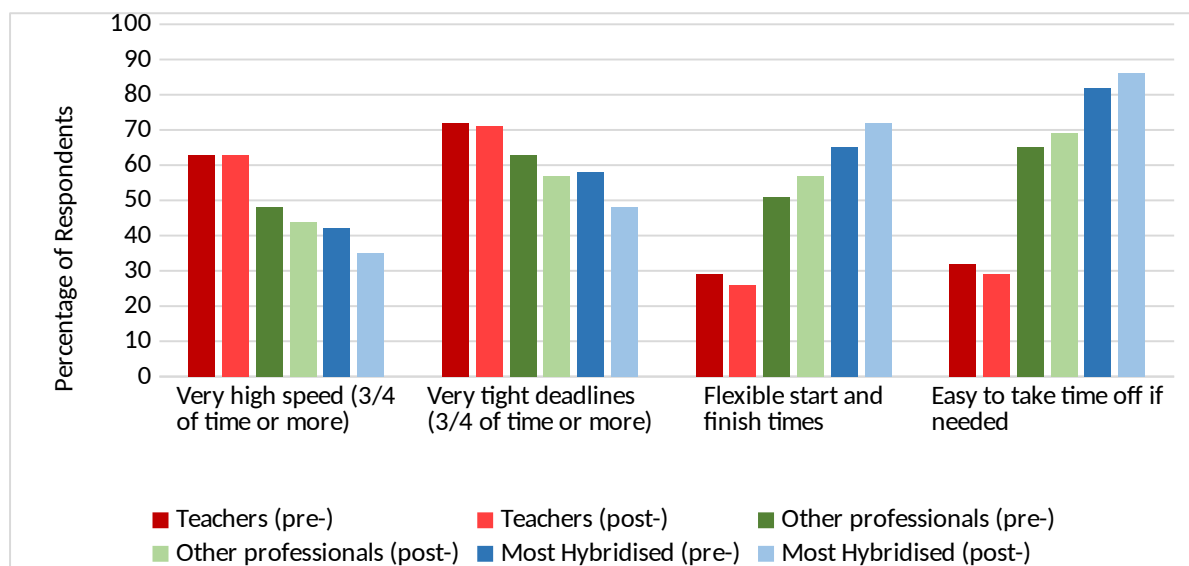
This briefing focuses on three aspects of job quality, chosen because these had been identified in prior research as of concern:

- i. Work intensity, defined as the rate of physical and/or mental input to work tasks performed during the working day. Highly-intensive work can be manifested in several ways, two of which are presented here: frequently working at high speed, and frequently working to tight deadlines.
- ii. Task discretion, defined as the extent to which people have some influence over what tasks they do and how they do them.
- iii. Time discretion, defined as the extent to which people have some flexibility over their work time, manifested here as being able: to vary start and finish times, and take time off of work for emergencies.

The briefing also looks at a possible outcome of high work intensity and long hours of work, namely reported feelings of exhaustion at the end of the working day.

2. Findings

Figure 1: Job Quality in Teaching, Other Professions, and ‘Most Hybridised’ Professions, Before and After the Pandemic



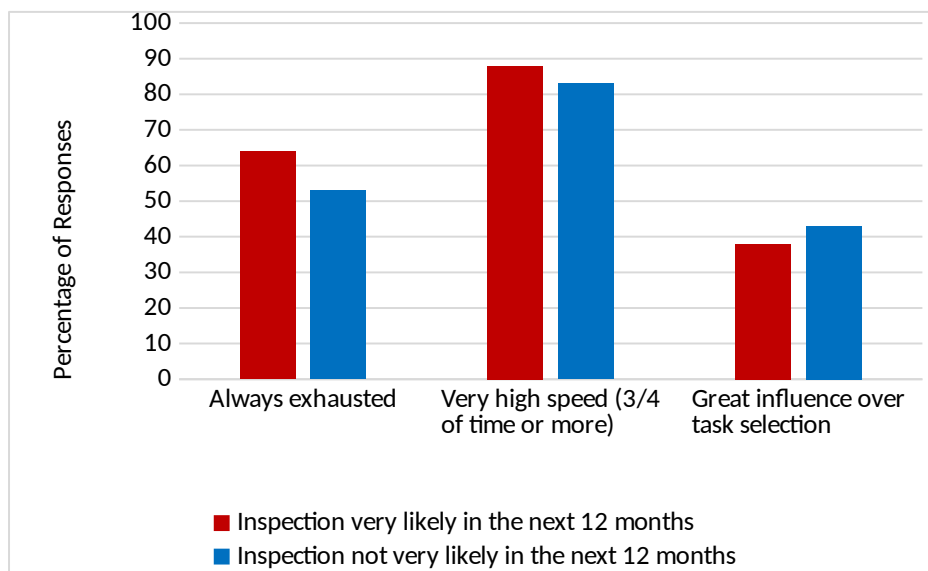
³ Felstead, A., D. Gallie, Y. Zhou, F. Green and G. Henseke (2019). "Conceiving, Designing And Trailing A Short Form Measure Of Job Quality: A Proof Of Concept Study." *Industrial Relations Journal* 50(1): 2-9.

Figure 1 shows how teachers' work intensity and time flexibility have changed from before the pandemic. In brief: not very much, but downward in some respects. The proportions working frequently at very high speed, or to very tight deadlines, have not significantly altered. Indeed, teachers remain more likely than other professional workers to be working at high speed. Similarly, teachers had less flexible working hours than other professional workers, both before and after the pandemic. They also found it more difficult to take time off for emergencies.

In contrast, other professional workers have experienced increases in their job quality: both a significant reduction in their work intensity and a significant increase in the flexibility of their working hours – both valued job quality features. Part of that increase is likely due to the availability of hybrid working for many professional workers. To illustrate, the figure also shows job quality of those in the 'most hybridised' professions, that is, those which have witness the most rapid shift towards hybrid working after the pandemic. As can be seen, job quality increased notably in these occupations.

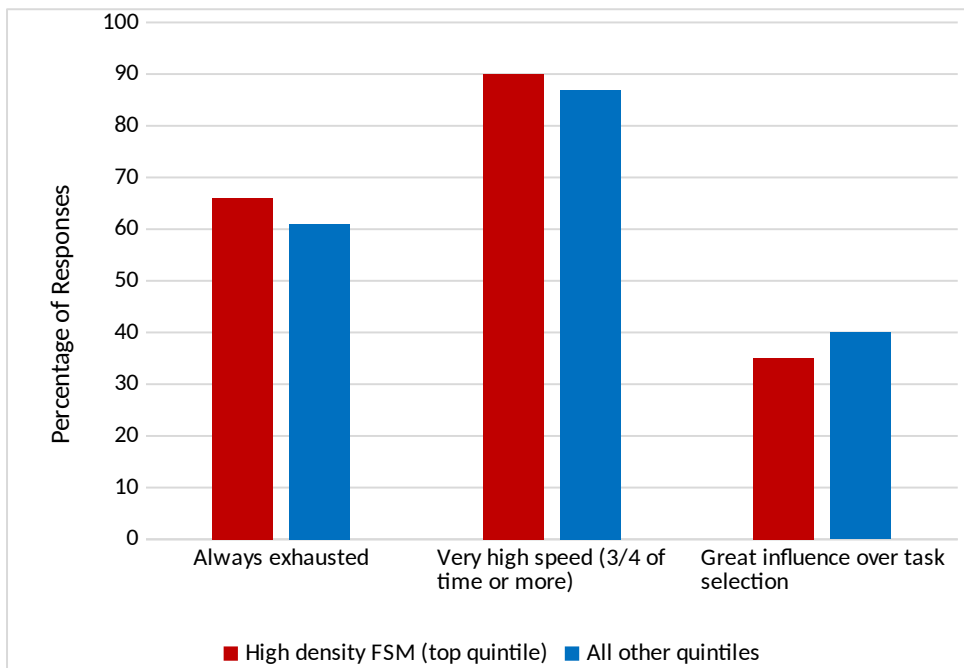
Figure 2 uses data from the survey of NEU members to compare the job quality of teachers, according to whether they anticipated a school inspection in the coming 12 months. It shows that work intensity is higher when an inspection is thought likely, and also that teachers report somewhat lower task discretion. The combination of working harder and with less control is known to be a potential source of job strain: 64% of teachers under the risk of inspection reported always coming home from work exhausted, as compared with 53% of other teachers.

Figure 2: Work Intensity, Task Discretion and Teacher Exhaustion by Likelihood of Inspection



We next classified teachers, using the NEU survey data, according to whether or not their school was in the top 20%, as measured by the proportion of pupils who take up free school meals (FSM) – a conventional, if simple indicator of social deprivation in the area. Figure 3 shows that work intensity is somewhat higher, and task discretion lower, in schools where the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals was high. A somewhat greater proportion of teachers working in these schools reported coming home from work exhausted: 66% of those in schools with high social deprivation as compared with 61% for other teachers.

Figure 3: Work Intensity, Task Discretion and Teacher Exhaustion by Social Deprivation



3. Conclusions

While teaching is a rewarding career, there is an ongoing problem in recruiting and retaining teachers. Recruitment issues have heightened since before the pandemic, making the retention of teachers in the profession even more important. While we cannot be certain, it seems likely that the job quality problem which underlies the difficulties with recruitment and retention of teachers is not confined to pay. This research has used *general* indicators of job quality, in order to view teachers’ changing working conditions in comparison with other occupations. However, the research did not aim to measure the many detailed ways in which teachers’ jobs can vary among people and places.

This briefing confirms that work intensity and corresponding levels of exhaustion remain high when compared with other comparable occupations. Looking at the change between before and after the pandemic, teachers’ jobs have neither worsened nor improved. However, many workers in other professional occupations have been able to switch to hybrid working patterns, which in turn has afforded certain benefits: the avoidance of commuting every day, and an improved ability to have some control over working hours and tasks – aspects which research tells us are highly valued. Teachers in schools for the most part do not have that option. Thus, the gap between teachers’ job quality and that of similar professions – which was already problematic before the pandemic after years of work intensification – has widened. In consequence, the comparative attractions of alternative careers may be becoming that much greater.

In addition, the research reveals that these aspects of job quality are significantly lower for those teachers working in socially deprived areas, and are also lower for those teachers who have been led to expect, rightly or wrongly, that their school will be inspected in the coming year. Teachers in deprived areas and in schools expecting a visit from inspectors are more likely to report coming home from work exhausted.