

Why are so many graduates shunning teaching? Pay—but not bonuses—could be the answer

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There is a [persistent shortage](#) of teachers in England. Numbers of new

recruits fail to meet targets, and too many teachers are leaving their jobs. It's clear that more new teachers are needed—but apparently, not enough people are [choosing the profession](#).

Much of the [existing evidence](#) about why people become [teachers](#) is based only on the views of existing or prospective trainee teachers. This is interesting but says nothing about why other people do not become teachers. And if we need to increase the number of applications to [teacher training](#), it is the people who decide against teaching that matter.

These people are the subject of [our research](#). We asked 4,500 [undergraduate students](#) in 53 universities in England about their career decisions generally and whether they had thought about teaching. Our findings suggest that rather than putting money into bonuses for [new teachers](#), the government should focus on improving the overall financial rewards of teaching.

[Incentive payments](#) are one of the main ways the government seeks to recruit people to teach. They are currently offered to trainees and early career teachers in hard to recruit for subjects such as math and physics.

Understandably, these payments are attractive to people who have already decided they want to be teachers. But we do not know whether they have much pull for people who choose not to become teachers. We don't know what it is that could lead people who might have considered and rejected the idea of becoming a teacher to think about this career path more seriously.

This lack of information could explain why a succession of policies and initiatives have not remedied the problem. In fact, when we asked all the students we surveyed—including those planning to be teachers—what drew them to a career, getting an introductory bonus was one of the least significant incentives.

For all of the students we surveyed, the biggest deterrent to teaching as a career was that teacher salaries were not high enough.

Identifying potential teachers

[We asked students](#) about their [career choices](#), including whether they had ever considered teaching as a job and what they thought now. We also asked them about their parents' jobs, their A-level or other pre-university qualification results, and the class of degree they expected to get.

A significant finding was that the students most likely to choose a career as a teacher were those who had somewhat lower prior results and lower expected degree awards than their peers. They were less likely to have a parent with a degree.

On the other hand, the students who were the highest academic achievers had the least interest in teaching.

Between the two groups—those intending to be teachers and those with no interest—was a third group. This was students who had considered teaching as a career option and then rejected it.

These students tend to study humanities, [social science](#), sports science, or language subjects. They were, like those who planned to be teachers, motivated by interest in their subject and a chance to share their knowledge.

This group of students could make excellent teachers. However, we found that their interest in teaching declines with every year at university.

We also found that the students who planned to become teachers were

less concerned about pay and promotion prospects than other students. Instead, they were more interested in job security than other students, as well as the chance to give back to society.

Findings like this might suggest that while low pay may not matter too much to people who were set on being a teacher, it might be the factor putting other potential teachers off.

One sociology student who had considered teaching, only to decide against it, said, "It's the pay as well ... It's not a nine to five. It's like a nine to five, plus your weekends and plus hours afterward."

Our findings showed that career intentions are reportedly set for most students by the time they have chosen their subject at university. Once at university, incentives such as golden hellos, training salaries, or grants make little difference. They are popular with intending teachers, of course, but do not appear to change the minds of students who have already decided on other careers.

This suggests any money available to try to attract teachers to the profession could be better used to increase salaries for teachers generally rather than temporary incentives for some.

But perhaps the best use of such money would be to raise the occupational profile and prestige of teachers, undercut by decades of media and political criticism. Suggestions to pilot could be paid sabbatical breaks and longer paid working hours but with lower [student](#) contact time. There must be others.

Exploring why some people choose not to be teachers means that policies can address the barriers to teaching and also make [teaching](#) more attractive to under-represented groups—such as men and some ethnic minorities.

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