



The Impact of the Early Career Framework (ECF) Programme on the Work Engagement, Wellbeing and Retention of Teachers: A Longitudinal Study, 2021–2026

Interim Research Report #2:

Early Career Teachers' and Mentors' Reported Experiences with the ECF Programme

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Research is an integral part of the UCL's Early Career Framework (ECF) programme. This is the second report in a series of research publications from the UCL Centre for Educational Leadership-led project, *The Impact of the ECF Programme on the Work Engagement, Wellbeing and Retention of Teachers: A Longitudinal Study, 2021–2026*.

ECF reform lies at the heart of the Department for Education's [teacher recruitment and retention strategy](#). The purpose of this mixed methods research is to assess the extent to which (and the ways in which) early career teachers' (ECTs') and their mentors' learning experiences with the ECF programme influence their decisions to stay in teaching, move schools, or leave the profession.

All ECTs and mentors in the UCL-led ECF programme were invited to complete a survey about their learning experiences with the ECF programme between June and October 2022. Of the approximately 12,000 invited ECTs and mentors, over 1,700 responded (response rate of 14%). The acquired sample of respondents is representative of national ECT and mentor populations in terms of gender, ethnicity, school phase and contract type, giving us confidence about the relevance and representativeness of our ECTs' and mentors' reported learning and career experiences to those of their peers *nationally*.

Key Messages

Key Message 1:

The vast majority of ECTs remained enthusiastic about their teaching job towards the end of the first year of their teaching career and believed that the practices suggested in the ECF programme would make a difference in the learning of their pupils.

- Nearly all (96%) of the surveyed ECTs and mentors reported intending to continue teaching the following year (c.f., 87.2% nationally in 2021/2).
- Over 90% of ECTs reported being enthusiastic about and inspired by their teaching job with 63% and 58%, respectively, in 'strong' agreement.

Key Message 2:

Most ECTs reported positive learning experiences with the ECF programme in terms of their satisfaction with the pedagogy of the programme, their mastery of the programme content, and the use of ECF learning in their work.

- More than 80% of ECTs agreed that the ECF programme was based on sound research about teaching and pupil learning (87%) and that the practices suggested in the ECF programme would make a difference in the learning of their pupils (83%).
- Structured mentor meetings were the learning strategy most valued by ECTs in the ECF programme, with 81% of ECTs agreeing that this strategy had contributed to their learning 'moderately', 'a lot' or 'significantly'. This view is endorsed by mentors' own perceptions. Almost all of the surveyed mentors (98%) reported being able to establish a strong mentor-mentee relationship and that their role as a mentor was meaningful to the development of their ECTs' teaching practice.

Key Message 3:

The results of the structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis show that the implementation of learning from the ECF programme improves ECTs' self-efficacy, resilience and engagement in teaching.

However, the extent to which ECTs can *use their learning in context* is dependent on the quality of in-school professional development cultures, which is created by school leadership.

This evidence points to the significant role of the school organisation in enabling or constraining the impact of the ECF programme on the learning and development of ECTs, suggesting that the ECF programme can only make a difference with regard to ECTs' retention decisions insofar if it is *supported by* and *integrated as part of* a school's professional learning culture.

The evidence also suggests that any solution to teacher retention that is based *only* on the human capital approach to developing teachers (i.e., through externally provided professional development programmes aimed at increasing individual teachers' knowledge, skills and dispositions) is less likely to bring about the desired retention outcomes.

Key Message 4:

The results of the SEM analysis show that job satisfaction is not the primary cause of teachers' destination decisions. Although in-school job satisfaction may seem to have a direct influence on teachers' decisions, how satisfied ECTs feel with their job, how well they teach (i.e., teacher efficacy) and how they perceive the quality of their working lives at school (i.e., teacher wellbeing in school) are dependent on the quality of in-school professional learning cultures, which are shaped by school leadership.

Thus, our findings disagree with the latest Department for Education (DfE) report on the working lives of teachers and school leaders, which asserted that "*considerations of leaving the state sector are primarily driven by teachers' and leaders' attitudes towards their jobs and, more broadly, their lives*" (DfE, 2023, p. 171). The results of the SEM analysis demonstrate that teachers' job satisfaction and wellbeing are more than individualised attitudinal attributes; rather, they are the organisational outcomes of leadership and culture. Future case studies in our research will unpack this complex relationship in greater depth.

Key Message 5:

The vast majority of mentors were motivated by their role as a mentor and felt that being a mentor had contributed to their own professional development. They felt highly positive about their schools' support for their mentoring role and felt that being a mentor had not had adverse consequences on their capacity to take on other responsibilities. However, their experiences with regard to mentoring workload varied significantly.

- Almost all of the surveyed mentors (94%) reported being motivated by their role as a mentor, with 84% in 'strong' or 'moderate' agreement, and a substantial majority (88%) reported that being a mentor had contributed to their own professional development, with 65% in 'strong' or 'moderate' agreement.
- Most mentors (81%) reported that they had received adequate support from their school, with more than 60% agreeing 'strongly' or 'moderately'.
- Although 29% of mentors *disagreed* 'strongly' or 'moderately' that they had adequate time to carry out their mentor role, around a third of mentors (34%) agreed to the same degree, with another 20% in 'slight' agreement.

Key Message 6:

Workload tensions related to being a mentor are part of *in-school workload culture*. Results of a series of logistic regression analyses show that, in schools where the leadership is perceived to be effective in enabling internal and external collaboration for educational improvement and where the culture and conditions are conducive for teaching, learning and professional growth, mentors were more likely to report that they had adequate time to fulfil their mentoring role. The evidence suggests that the ECF programme cannot be held as solely responsible for the lack of mentoring time in certain schools.

Conclusions

Despite the magnitude of challenges that ECTs face during their first year of teaching, the most encouraging finding from our survey has to be the observation that the vast majority of ECTs remain inspired by their teaching job and want to stay in the profession. This finding offers *hope and promise* with regard to the learning and achievement of the children and young people in our schools.

There is also encouraging news for ECF reform. For most ECTs, participation in the ECF programme in their first year of teaching increased their self-efficacy, resilience, job satisfaction and wellbeing in teaching. However, school leadership that prioritises and enables collaborative teacher development is a necessary condition for securing the positive impact of the ECF programme on teacher learning, development and retention.

By extension, the ECF programme offers an opportunity to improve the school system's collective capacity to lead learning in which school leaders, facilitators and mentors are *active partners* who work to create the right environment that enables ECTs to apply their learning in their classrooms, enjoy making a difference with other teachers at their school and feel fulfilled as professionals in teaching.

Taken together, our research evidence to date points to two tentative conclusions. First, the ECF programme can have and has had a positive impact on the learning and development of many ECTs. Second, the ECF programme alone is unable to 'transform' support for ECTs' professional development, as the DfE envisaged in its reform strategy (DfE, 2023¹). The school organisation provides the necessary conditions that enable the desired learning transformation to happen.

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/782608/6.5092_DfE_Teacher_Retention_Strategy_1Pager_v10ii.pdf