

Teacher Career Pathways: Summary of a TEPE webinar

On 16 September 2021 the [Teacher Education Policy in Europe Network](#) organized a webinar on career pathways for teachers. The reason for this theme was the need to explore how teachers can stay motivated in their profession during a longer time span. This motivation is key for retaining teachers in their profession, and key for learners in schools, as motivated and passionate teachers are better in supporting their learning.

During the webinar, the focus was on the question how teacher career paths could support this long lasting motivation and wellbeing of teachers. As many countries are struggling with teacher shortage, the question how to retain teachers and how career opportunities can contribute to this, is of high importance.

The webinar consisted of three parts. In the first part three keynote presenters explored the issue of teacher career paths from different angles (a recording of this first part is available [here](#)). In the second part subgroups discussed issues and experiences and exchanged policy examples from different countries. In the third part, the outcomes of this exchange were collected and key issues for further exploration were identified, especially in relation to the role of teacher education.

Keynotes

In the [first keynote](#), **Marco Snoek**, professor at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, started by reflecting on the structure of the teacher profession. As in most schools teachers are individually working in a classroom context, they are expected to be 'classroom ready' right from the start. As a result, teacher education policy has predominantly been focused on initial teacher education and on the question how teacher candidates should be educated in such a way that they are able to contribute as independent teachers to pupils learning in schools right from the start. However, this focus on preparing teachers for the start of their profession runs the risk of strengthening the image of the teacher profession as a static profession where an initial preparation for the profession is sufficient for a lifelong qualification as a teacher. This ignores the importance of life long professional development, both for the wellbeing of students as for the wellbeing and continuous motivation and inspiration of teachers. Therefore, it is essential to understand the teacher profession and teacher education as a continuum stretching from the initial phase over induction to continuous learning throughout a teacher's professional life. This process of life long professional development needs to be supported by recognition and opportunities to put experience, growing expertise and new insights and skill to good use in schools. Such recognition and opportunities are not only important for schools and pupils as they contribute to improved quality of teaching and learning in schools, but also for teachers, as they contribute to the attractiveness of the teacher profession.

This recognition of teachers' professional growth needs to be formalized in career opportunities and career pathways for teachers. This has resulted in a growing attention for teacher careers and career

support, both at school level and at system level (see for example [recent work](#) of the Working Group Schools from the European Commission). Both in policy studies and in national and European guidelines and initiatives a number of issues emerge, e.g. regarding possible roles and career paths, support systems, organizational structures in schools, methods of recognition, the role of teacher assessment, the balance between school/system needs and individual ambitions of teachers, et cetera.

As an example of national policy development Marco Snoek elaborated on a grassroot development in the Netherlands where teacher education institutions, national school boards, teacher bodies, regional networks on teacher shortage and regional authorities collaborate in making career opportunities more visible, and on developing support structures both for teachers in taking career steps and for school leaders and HR staff in school in supporting this.

In the [second keynote](#), **Barbara Tournier and Chloé Chimier** from UNESCO's International Institute for Education Planning IIEP presented [their study on career systems](#) in different countries. They made a distinction between first generation career systems – which are characterized by single salary schedules, where teachers progress through the salary scale at the same pace, based on qualifications and seniority – and second generation career systems which show more variation and opportunities for progression. As within the first generation systems there is little recognition of teachers' dedication to improving their practice, such systems might impact teacher motivation and attrition, and result in the best teachers leaving the classroom. In second generation career systems there is more room for meritocratic recognition of performance and professional improvement, either through bonus pay, salary progression, or through making steps in a career ladder. In all three models, teacher appraisal plays a key role, which might be a challenge in terms of administrative capacity within school systems. Bonus pay can lead to increased competition between teachers, while career ladders that recognize different roles within schools can stimulate collaboration between teachers. While all cases included in the study have a career ladder in place, nearly all included elements from different career generations and models. As a result the impact of different career models is difficult to identify.

In their conclusions, Barbara and Chloé emphasized the importance of diversifying teachers' roles to keep good teachers in the classroom and of institutionalizing support roles and fostering collaboration between teachers. Teacher career ladders have the potential to be effective and to improve teacher attraction and retention if properly designed and implemented but require the system to be ready for such reforms. Governments need to carefully evaluate their administrative capacity before launching into major reforms. Moreover, attempts at improving the status of the profession will be pointless unless salaries are attractive. Governments need to be aware that their efforts will need to be incremental and sustained over several decades to be successful.

In the [third keynote](#), **Björn Åstrand**, associate professor at Umea University in Sweden reflected on the ongoing process regarding improving teacher careers in Sweden. As a starting point he distinguished between different levels of excellence (based on the work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus): novice, beginner, competent, proficient and expert. These different levels do not only create a framework for teacher development, but also for the utilization of expertise. As a result, career models need to focus both on development of competence during the career, on (transparent) recognition of these competence, but also on the strategic use of competence within the education system. This last element requires an

advanced and diversified system for employment, where schools offer positions at different levels, including collaboration with other institutions to combine posts for teacher education, research etc. The development of these three elements in a coherent way requires a (pro-)active involvement of the profession itself, a shared understanding and ambition of all stakeholders throughout the system, clear quality indicators for the teacher profession, and recognition of the importance and status of teachers.

Discussions and resulting key questions

In the four subgroups, different elements were discussed. During the discussions, the importance of the following topics was emphasized:

- The recognition that the teacher profession cannot be one in which initial teacher education is considered as a lifelong qualification (from a ‘now or never’ perspective), but where teacher education needs to be seen as a progressive process where high expectations are combined with high support and underlying professional trust.
- The involvement of the profession (through a professional body or similar representative body) in defining the pathways towards teacher excellence.
- A culture in school where differences between teachers are recognized and valued and considered as an enrichment for professional collaboration (in contrast to a culture where all teachers are considered as and expected to be uniform).
- An attitude that fosters continuous professional development throughout the professional life of teachers.
- Collaboration between school, teacher education institutes and regions.
- The possibility to reconnect teachers and teacher education institutes after graduation.
- Recognition, not only in financial terms (salaries), but also in terms of other types of appreciation (e.g. through engagement of teachers in shared leadership practices and opportunities for collaborative work that de-isolates teachers). This recognition needs also to value explicitly the work and excellence of teachers in classroom contexts.
- Connecting system perspectives, structures and cultures that are collaborative and developmental.

These topics raise a number of key questions regarding teacher education that need to be answered for the further development of practice and policy in teacher education:

1. How can initial teacher education be designed in such a way that it supports developmental and collaborative mindsets of teachers?
2. What role can and should teacher education institutes play in
 - a. supporting the progressive development of teachers both towards excellence at classroom level and in other roles throughout their career?
 - b. supporting the development of different career competences for teachers?
 - c. supporting the recognition of qualities and qualifications of teachers for specific specialized roles?

- d. supporting schools in developing career development policies as part of school HR policies
3. How can teachers, schools, teacher education institutes and professional bodies of teachers collaborate in this, so as to de-privatise the ideas and practices of individual teachers?
4. How can teacher education institutions support and stimulate school leadership to develop contexts that serve as fertile soil for lifelong teacher development, including the organization of systematic appreciation for teachers?
5. What are essential financial, organizational and juridical conditions for teacher education institution to take on these roles?

Research and the collection of inspiring national or regional practices can help in finding answers to these questions.