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# What is a non-specialist teacher?

*Conference Paper Abstract*

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## Abstract

In recent months, the media has reported on increasing numbers of non-specialist teachers in UK schools, connecting this to teacher shortages and job dissatisfaction. This study sought to investigate who non-specialist teachers are and the challenges that they and heads of department face. The subjects of interest were Physics, Maths, Drama, Computer Science and ICT. The findings from this research can be used to inform methods of support for non-specialists, and give an insight into what impact increasing proportions of non-specialist teachers has on staff and students.

An online survey was developed to target both specialist and non-specialist teachers – in order to contrast their responses – and heads of department. It was piloted by current teachers and heads of department of each subject of interest before going live. One questionnaire was created, with three different ‘branches’ depending on responses to preceding questions – those who indicated they were a non-specialist were directed to certain questions, specialists to slightly different questions, and heads of department to a totally different set. The survey was distributed via Cambridge Assessment’s social media platforms and mailing lists, and yielded 1094 responses.

Non-specialists most commonly defined themselves as such because their degree was in another subject. Heads of department were in agreement, often additionally referring to a lack of subject-specific teaching qualifications. Generally the non-specialists began teaching their non-specialist subject due to having some relevant skills and experience during teacher shortages. Heads of Physics, Maths and Computer Science/ICT departments reported that they had experienced difficulty recruiting specialists in the last two years, and more so than in the past. Non-specialists mostly taught at Key Stage 3 and/or GCSE, very rarely at A-level.

Most heads of department reported that they experienced a significant time burden from supporting non-specialists, though many non-specialists reported receiving little support from their schools. Non-specialists found certain aspects of teaching more challenging than specialists, in particular confidently answering students’ questions, predicting performance, moderating assessment and setting controlled assessment. However, responses suggested some ‘silver linings’ – for teachers, departments and students – to employing non-specialists. Most non-specialists reported that teaching their non-specialist subject positively impacted their teaching of their specialist subject. Additionally, heads of department reported that non-specialists often brought a fresh perspective to teaching, and were able to make cross-curricular links. Finally, many non-specialists said that they enjoyed teaching their non-specialist subject – and 19.8% reported that they actually preferred teaching it to their specialist subject.