



The Teacher Learning Academy

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An Evaluation of the Teacher Learning  
Academy: Phases 1 and 2

**Final report  
(Summary report)**

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# Summary Report

## 1 Introduction

This summary sets out key findings from an evaluation of Phases 1 and 2 of the pilot Teacher Learning Academy (TLA). The research was conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) on behalf of the General Teaching Council for England (GTC).

### 1.1 About the Teacher Learning Academy

The pilot TLA has been established by the GTC to provide professional and public recognition for teachers' learning and development work. The Academy offers the opportunity for the learning that occurs in teachers' daily professional lives to be acknowledged through a national system. The Academy provides professional recognition across six stages, from 'Associate' (entry-level) to 'Senior Fellow' (equivalent to an education doctorate).

Beginning in academic year 2003–04, the TLA was first piloted in three local authorities (LAs): Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield (Phase 1). The GTC, the LA and a local Higher Education Institute (HEI) collaborated to launch the Academy in each of these areas. From September 2004, the pilot was extended into other contexts and partners across England (Phase 2). This included LAs, groups of LAs and training schools as well as work with other CPD providers (whereby professional development conducted through these means could form the basis of a TLA submission). The Academy began Phase 3 in September 2005.

### 1.2 About the research

This report draws together evidence relating to Phases 1 and 2 of the pilot, which was garnered via the following methods.

#### Enrolment data

- A statistical analysis of the enrolment forms completed by teachers joining the pilot TLA in Phases 1 and 2.

#### Phase 1 Data collection involving all three LAs participating in the TLA during this phase

- Interviews with GTC link advisers, and LA and HEI representatives
- observations of three launch events, three local support group meetings and six sessions of verifier training
- nine case studies, involving interviews with the case-study teachers, and the headteacher and/or CPD coordinator in their school

- a telephone interview survey of 57 participating teachers, 40 of whom had submitted projects to the TLA for recognition at the time of their interviews (for ease of reference called ‘submitters’) and 17 who had yet to submit (‘non-submitters’)
- in order to ascertain any long-term impacts of participation in the Academy, follow-up interviews were conducted with LA/HEI representatives, with three of the case-study teachers and their headteachers and/or school CPD coordinators, and with 24 of the submitters from the telephone interview survey.

## **Phase 2 Data collection primarily involving eight of the partners participating in the TLA during this phase**

- Interviews with GTC managers and with the GTC link advisers working with the eight partners
- interviews with representatives leading the TLA in each of the eight partners
- observations of four local support group meetings and five verifier training sessions
- six case studies, involving interviews with the case-study teachers, and the headteacher and/or CPD coordinator in their school
- a telephone interview survey of 113 submitters
- a telephone interview survey of 15 verifiers.

In total, in the course of the research, 250 interviews were conducted.

### **1.3 About the TLA enrolees**

Statistical analysis was undertaken of 1,267 of the enrolment forms completed by teachers upon joining the TLA. The characteristics of these enrolees are set out below.

- Phase 1 of the pilot operated in three LAs, and Phase 2 involved around 30 partners. In total, 283 of the enrolment forms were from Phase 1 enrolees and 984 were from Phase 2.
- Primary and secondary teachers were represented in the Academy in almost equal measure. Of these 1,267 enrolees, 48 per cent taught the primary age range, 47 per cent were secondary teachers, and five per cent worked in special educational needs (SEN) schools, were LA based or were supply teachers.
- Taking both Phases of the pilot together, half of the enrolees entered the Academy at Stage 1<sup>1</sup> and close to one-third joined at Stage 2. Proportionately more of the Stage 2 enrolments were from Phase 1 where one of the participating LAs had strong links with a local HEI and encouraged its teachers to enter at Stage 2 and work towards academic accreditation as well as TLA recognition.
- The TLA attracted teachers at all stages of their careers, with the highest proportion in this analysis being recently qualified teachers (42 per cent of the

<sup>1</sup>Enrolees’ Stage of entry: Stage 1: 49%; Stage 2: 29%; Stage 3: 10%; Stages 4–6: 1%; undecided/more than one box ticked: 8%; non-response: 3%.

1,267 had been members of the profession for between 1–5 years). Amongst the enrolees were staff at all levels of responsibility in school.

When asked why they had become involved in the Academy, the key reason cited by almost half of the 1,267 enrolees was the opportunity for recognition that the TLA offered, especially the recognition of work undertaken on a day-to-day basis in school. The next most common reasons (each stated by almost one-quarter of enrolees) related to the development of and reflection on teachers' own learning, and the opportunity that the Academy offered for CPD. Thus, on the basis of the enrolment forms, **the principle reasons for participation are commensurate with the underlying rationales of the Academy – professional development in everyday practice and the continuation, development and evaluation of teachers' own learning.**

Comparison across the two Phases of the pilot showed some differences in the rationales given for participation in the Academy. Most notably, in Phase 2 there was an increase in the proportion that had enrolled because of a recommendation, most often from their school or a CPD provider. In Phase 1, one in ten enrolees had been recommended to join; in Phase 2, it was one in four.

## 2 Impacts of involvement in the TLA

The research probed submitters' views of the outcomes of TLA participation, and analysis sought to identify the factors associated with these impacts.

### 2.1 Impacts of TLA involvement for submitters

As part of their interviews, submitters in the telephone survey were asked in an open-ended question, *'What have been the main impacts of undertaking your TLA project so far?'*. In response, they were almost unanimously positive, with only six of the 153 interviewed submitters reporting no impact for them. The main impacts that they identified were as follows, in order of frequency:

- the **opportunity to reflect on teaching and learning**
- the **development of their teaching practice**
- the **acquisition of new knowledge and skills**
- the opportunity to **work with colleagues**
- their **enhanced contribution to the school**
- the **status** and recognition gained through TLA involvement
- increases in their **motivation and confidence.**

In a further inquiry, submitters were asked to rate the effect of TLA participation on seven specified areas using a five-point scale. The strongest impacts were registered on: **enhancements to pupils' learning and school experiences**; enrolees' own **teaching practice**; and **contribution to colleagues and the school**. For two-thirds of the interviewed submitters, the effects had been considerable in each of these areas, especially in Phase 1.

There was some evidence that the outcomes that submitters derived from undertaking a TLA project were long lasting. Albeit based on small numbers, when 27 Phase 1 submitters were followed up, the long-term impacts they described were largely of the same order as the more immediate impacts of TLA involvement that they had rated six months earlier.

The vast majority of the interviewed submitters reported that their involvement in the TLA had altered their perceptions and understanding of professional development. Their changed perspectives included:

- an increased understanding that professional development was part of their **everyday teaching practice**
- a shift in attitude away from regarding professional learning as a course-based experience in favour of viewing it as **an ongoing school-based activity**
- an enhanced awareness of the merits of **collaborative working** and of **formally evaluating and reflecting** on practice as key features of professional learning
- an appreciation that engaging in professional development alongside teaching duties **need not be onerous and time consuming**.

## **2.2 Factors associated with the impacts experienced**

In both Phases 1 and 2, the **six core dimensions** of the TLA were identified as the key factors that led to the impacts that submitters had derived. The core dimensions highlighted as having particular significance in this regard included:

- **accessing peer support**
- **evaluating the impact on practice and own learning**
- **disseminating what has been learnt.**

In addition to acting as catalysts for the outcomes that participants derived, accessing peer support and evaluating one's own practice were actually also identified as impacts in themselves (as section 2.1 shows).

### Main impacts of involvement in the TLA for submitters

#### The opportunity to reflect on teaching and learning

*It makes you reflect more on what you are doing in school and on how what you are doing does have an immediate impact on the children and on the school in general (Phase 2 submitter, primary).*

#### The development of their teaching practice

*It's certainly benefited my classroom management skills and the monitoring of behaviour and also how to model appropriate behaviour to challenging pupils. It's altered the way I plan my lessons, both the way I plan the content and also the way I actually plan the physical layout of the classrooms (Phase 2 submitter, secondary).*

#### The opportunity to work with colleagues

*It enabled me to get to know more staff, which was a really key thing for me as an NQT [newly qualified teacher]. When you're new to the school and new to the profession, you're so busy and overwhelmed you tend to operate within your comfort zone with your fellow NQTs. Getting involved with the TLA meant that I was involved with 20 other people doing it and that brought me into contact with people who'd been in the profession 25 years and work in other departments I never have contact with (Phase 2 submitter, secondary).*

#### Enhanced contribution to the school

*It has had a huge impact across the school. We've now got departments that are following an Assessment for Learning cycle that we put together. We've developed resource materials for staff, we've led heads of department meetings, whole-school staff meetings and briefings. But there's also been opportunity to take it beyond the school, out into the local community to conferences as well as working with the LEA (Phase 2 submitter, secondary).*

#### Status and recognition

*I have the certificate which I was quite proud of and also I've put it on my CV and my school file. I've used it as part of my job application when I applied for my new role in September (Phase 2 submitter, secondary).*

#### Motivation and confidence

*Doing something new, having ownership of it, and implementing it into the classroom, and then seeing the benefits for the children, it is very empowering and motivating, and keeps people engaged in teaching and learning (Phase 1 submitter, primary).*

## 3 The manageability of participation in the TLA

Participants' perceptions of the manageability of taking part in the TLA were explored.

### 3.1 Overall challenges

Submitters' perspectives on manageability were probed through both an open question, e.g. 'What, if any, have been the main challenges for you in undertaking your TLA project so far?', and a closed item where interviewees rated on a five-point scale five pre-determined areas of potential challenge.

Drawing together the evidence from both lines of inquiry, participation in the Academy was regarded as 'reasonably manageable, but ...'. It was these 'buts' that caused teachers challenge (sometimes considerable). Submitters' chief concerns were with **finding time for completing the submission** and understanding **the TLA requirements**. Regarding the latter, over the course of the pilot, around two-fifths of interviewed submitters (slightly less so in Phase 2) rated this as rather difficult in

response to the closed inquiry. There was also a sense that teachers did not know how to solve or resolve their concerns (for example, who to ask for help; where to go next in the TLA; the submission requirements; and the submission process). These concerns carry particular resonance given interviewees' resulting uncertainty as to whether they would continue with their TLA project while there were such issues to contend with. Indeed, whilst the submission rate improved in Phase 2, the number of enrolees who are non-submitters exceeds those who are currently submitters within the TLA.

None the less, there was progress within the Academy over the course of the pilot in terms of the manageability of submitters' involvement. The identification of challenges was overall **less frequent** and **generally less emphatic** in Phase 2 compared with Phase 1. For example, in response to the open enquiry, almost one-third of the Phase 2 submitters interviewed felt that there had been no real problematic areas for them in undertaking their TLA project – a far greater proportion than at Phase 1.

**Greater peer-peer collaboration** within schools, **whole-school involvement**<sup>2</sup> and the provision of organised **hands-on, step-by-step support sessions** convened at partner- or school-level contributed to a more manageable experience for teachers. In addition, where teachers selected projects that were **part of their everyday practice**, manageability issues were eased. Further, there was suggestion in the data that the workload pressures of balancing teaching duties with a TLA project might be alleviated by **building the TLA into existing professional development structures and vice versa**. This might include the marrying of performance management structures with the TLA at school level, or through the development of an Opportunities Framework at local authority level.

The above features were more in evidence in Phase 2 than in Phase 1; however, they were not all present in all locations, nor were they experienced by all teachers interviewed at Phase 2 even where they were in place. There was still a range of experience amongst the Phase 2 interviewees, with some inconsistency as regards the level and nature of the support available across the Academy.

A further key issue remaining in the TLA was centred around teachers' concern over the conceptual **level of the work** being undertaken. This was rated as more of a challenge in Phase 2 than in Phase 1.

- On the one hand, this was related to the effort and hard work relayed by many of the submitters, signifying a **level of rigour** and personal undertaking they wished to invest in the work.
- On the other hand, there were also reports of the 'extra' amount of work and time that teachers had given to their projects and write-ups (in some cases over and above their initial expectations).

The implication of this was the need for unambiguous **explanations of the expectations** for Stage 1 and Stage 2 submissions.

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<sup>2</sup>It is important to note here that whole-school involvement needs to be balanced with individuals' own choice. School-imposed participation could militate against teacher engagement with the Academy and lessen the impacts derived.

An additional issue affecting the manageability of the Academy was reflected in the experience of *some* of the submitters who had become involved in the TLA via other CPD provision (e.g. through involvement via another national body or on a local authority-run course). This group perhaps had the least manageable experience in the TLA overall. Here, interpreting the requirements of the TLA, matching their projects to the submission form and accessing guidance and mentoring generally proved more problematic.

#### **Manageability: chief concerns**

##### **Finding time to prepare the submission**

*Not the actual project itself, it was literally just finding the time to do it [the submission] [that was challenging]. That's the only barrier that I had – the nature of physically writing it all down because that was the time-consuming element* (Phase 2 submitter, secondary).

##### **Understanding the TLA requirements**

*As a teacher, you're used to teaching children to meet exam and assessment requirements, and here [in the TLA] they weren't very clear what those were. You weren't quite sure exactly what people were looking for ...* (Phase 2 submitter, secondary).

## **4 Future developments in the TLA**

The research considered the future of the TLA, and in doing so explored its currency and additionality, and examined the scaling-up of the Academy to a national level<sup>3</sup>.

### **4.1 The currency of the TLA**

In order to gain a measure of the value attached to the TLA, all interviewees (submitters, non-submitters, verifiers, case-study CPD coordinators/headteachers and partner leads) were asked what they perceived to be its most valuable aspects, either actual or potential.

All but three of these interviewees identified aspect(s) of the Academy that they regarded as valuable, indicating that the TLA was a highly regarded model of professional development. Two elements of the Academy were perceived as particularly valuable: primarily **the recognition it provides for teachers' work**, and secondly **the model of professional development that it promotes**. Particular features of the TLA model were seen to contribute to its value in this regard:

- it provides the opportunity to **work alongside colleagues** and share knowledge and good practice
- it encourages teachers to **reflect on their practice**
- it offers **progressive CPD through the Academy Stages**
- it provides **opportunities for career progression** and promotion
- it allows teachers to pursue and focus upon their **individual areas of interest**

<sup>3</sup>One possible caveat to bear in mind when interpreting the findings in this section is that much – though by no means all – of the perceptual data comes from interviewees who had submitted projects to the TLA for recognition. These submitters were for the most part, by their own admission, committed to professional development and in schools supportive of professional development, so the extent to which they are representative of the wider teacher body is hard to ascertain. That said, there was a good deal of consistency regarding the strengths of the Academy in the views expressed by all those interviewed in the course of the research – submitters, non-submitters, case-study CPD coordinators/headteachers, verifiers and partner leads, alike.

- it facilitates and **promotes action research** in schools
- it **raises the status of the teaching profession** and encourages professionalism
- it offers an **alternative to HEI courses**
- it **motivates teachers** and enhances their confidence.

#### Valuable elements of the TLA

##### Recognition of the work done by teachers as part of their everyday practice

*I would say that [the value lies in] being able to do something, as a classroom practitioner, and for it to be worth something in the larger world, and there being some sort of recognition for that. I don't think that there is enough recognition for the hard work that goes on in schools (Phase 1 non-submitter, secondary).*

*It's getting that recognition for things that you're doing anyway. There is a huge push in teaching for professional development, but actually being able to turn around and prove it, there is very little way of proving anything in our career. It's getting that bit of paper which you can use to prove that you've actually done something towards your profession (Phase 2 submitter, primary).*

##### Encouraging and providing an effective model of professional development

*We've [the teaching profession] had a very amateurish attitude towards professional development – it's ad-hoc, it's bitty, it's random, and it's been without any sort of rigour in the past. The TLA will introduce this... (Phase 1 case-study CPD coordinator/headteacher, primary).*

##### Progressive route through CPD

*It [the TLA] provides teachers with some sort of progression and a route for their professional development. Having been involved with CPD work at county level, one of the things that other teachers and I have been crying out for is guidance on 'What can I do next to develop professionally?'. You come across a lot of dead-end routes. It's good that the TLA has levels. It gives something at a very beginning level and you can take it as far as you want it to go (Phase 2 submitter, primary).*

## 4.2 Additionality of the TLA

### Comparing the impact of the TLA with other forms of professional development

Two-thirds of submitters believed that their involvement with the TLA had had a greater impact than other forms of professional development in which they had taken part. Compared with Phase 1, in Phase 2 there was increased reference to the 'different' impact of the TLA. Thus, these findings would indicate that for submitters, greater or at least alternative benefits can be gained from participation in the TLA.

When explaining why the Academy had a greater or different impact than other forms of CPD, the following features were advanced by interviewees:

- it is a form of **self directed learning**, where teachers could choose their own focus and where they are accountable for their own learning
- it requires a **reflective and evaluative approach** to CPD, encouraging teachers to think about their practice
- it involves carrying out school-based projects where teachers can see **immediate results**
- it is a more '**hands-on**' approach to professional development
- teachers receive **recognition for their learning and efforts**

- and finally it is more **long term** and continuous than other forms of CPD, involves **collaboration** with colleagues and **dissemination** of learning.

### **Recognition for professional development**

We can gain a further sense of the additionality of the TLA by considering whether the Academy attracted teachers who had not previously sought recognition for their professional development. To this end, analysis revealed that of the interviewed submitters in Phases 1 and 2, slightly more had not undertaken HEI-led courses in the past compared with those who had done so. For some enrolees, the Academy was seen as offering an attractive alternative to studying on traditional higher education courses, and encouraged those who had been inhibited by the workload involved with HEI courses to explore the route of the TLA

## **4.3 Scaling up to national level**

### **Making the TLA available to teachers nationwide**

In total, over 90 per cent of all responding interviewees (including submitters, non-submitters, verifiers, case-study CPD coordinators/headteachers and partner leads) believed that the TLA should be rolled out nationwide. A plethora of reasons were advanced as to why, many reflecting the value of the Academy as outlined in the currency section above (4.1). Given the early challenges that affected the TLA in its first Phase, interviewees at Phase 2 recommended a national roll-out more unreservedly than their Phase 1 counterparts.

### **Progression to the next Stage of the TLA**

In order to ascertain whether participants regarded the TLA as a once-only experience or whether they were keen to continue their involvement, interviewed submitters were asked whether they planned to work towards the next Stage in the Academy. Over three-quarters of the submitters interviewed at Phase 1 had such intentions. At Phase 2, the figure was nearer to three-fifths. This finding suggests that fewer Phase 2 submitters in the sample were intending to work towards the next Stage than those from Phase 1. Analysis showed that this was primarily attributable to two factors:

- **competition from other more immediately recognised qualifications:** a number of teachers chose to embark on National College for School Leadership courses or Masters-level degrees rather than continue within the Academy – this suggests a need for greater publicity and heightened status of the TLA
- **a perceived lack of information and awareness of the next Stages of the Academy** – this suggests a need to promote the Stages of the TLA and provide additional information for teachers on how to progress.

### **Suggested improvements to the TLA**

The improvements advised by interviewees are set out as follows in order of frequency.

- **Improvements to the support available in the TLA:** having a lead person, mentor or contact more readily available; further provision of TLA meetings and support groups.
- **Greater publicity and heightened status for the TLA:** publicity was seen to be crucially important to the future success of the TLA, particularly regarding its currency alongside other more recognisable national qualifications.
- **Clearer guidance and guidelines on the submission form and the expectations of the TLA:** to include materials written with less jargon and increased use of 'plain English'.
- **Access to exemplar materials.**
- **Clearer information on the Stages of the TLA:** to acquaint interviewees better with the level of work needed at a particular Stage; to provide them with encouragement and information on how to proceed to the next Stage in the Academy.

The Academy approach being trialled in Phase 3 of the pilot would seem to have the potential to fulfil several of the recommendations interviewees suggested. This involves setting up the Academy in **hubs of schools**, with each school in the hub having a trained TLA leader and verifier. The TLA leader, with the backing of local partners and a GTC link adviser, could offer the support enrolees felt they needed through the entire process from project start-up to submission, could facilitate peer-to-peer collaboration and would be very readily accessible to participants in their school. This latter point is pertinent given acknowledgement amongst some interviewed submitters and non-submitters in Phases 1 and 2 that they themselves had at times lacked initiative and had not asked for or actively sought any help.

In Phase 3, **links with national partners and other CPD providers** are also an area for continued development. Such work will go some way to raising the Academy's profile, as it widens its availability and helps enable the TLA to position itself in the professional development landscape, both as integral to other CPD offerings as well as a fixture in its own right. It should be borne in mind though that action was needed to alleviate the manageability issues experienced by a number of those joining the TLA via other CPD providers.

Thus, whilst the developments in Phase 3 respond to the areas of concern that interviewees put forward, analysis did show that **the future development of the TLA is closely associated with the resolution of these and the other improvements suggested and, as such, this may need continued monitoring and action.** For example, decisions as to whether to continue working within the Academy were related to: the availability of information on progression through the TLA; the expectations of each Stage; support and guidance; and the Academy's currency and status. Furthermore, there are other issues that are fundamental to the continued development of the TLA that the evidence suggested were in need of attention. Chief amongst these were the **management of the procedures for verification and moderation** and the **long-term planning and financial future of the Academy.**

## **5 Overall concluding comment**

In the two years since the evaluation began, the TLA has developed from an Academy available in three local authorities to one that has representation in all Government Office Regions; has forged major links with national partners, teacher unions and professional associations; and has received over 300 submissions. The TLA in Phase 1, whilst experiencing teething troubles inevitable in any new venture, was highly valued by interviewed submitters and they derived significant outcomes from their involvement. This continued in Phase 2, together with some improvement in the manageability difficulties that had hindered the rate of submissions in Phase 1. The TLA leader/hub model being trialled in Phase 3 takes on board and has the potential to resolve further the manageability issues that concern participants. Thus, whilst areas key to its future viability still require attention, there has been considerable progress to date, reflecting the endeavours and conviction of the participating teachers, schools, verifiers, partners and the GTC.