

Rt. Hon Ed Balls MP
Secretary of State for Children,
Schools and Families
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

29 April 2010

Dear Secretary of State,

Masters in Teaching and Learning

I am writing to you to highlight correspondence between the Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education (ACME) and the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) regarding the development of the Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL), and to alert you to policy issues arising from our discussion.

ACME welcomes the general move towards providing encouragement and funding for continued study while teaching, making teaching a masters-level career, and making continued professional development an ongoing expectation. We do, however, have some serious concerns regarding the structure and lack of subject-specific content of the MTL, and do not believe that, as things currently stand, it will necessarily lead to better mathematics teaching. There are three key points we wish to bring to your attention:

1. Lack of subject-specific focus

The report of the DCSF/BIS Science and Learning Expert Group highlighted the need for the MTL to focus on development of subject knowledge and subject-specific pedagogy (paragraph 56 of the report). Under the present TDA proposals, this would only be an optional part of the MTL, set against a diverse choice of topics; it would come second to topics which relate to current fashions rather than the improvement of knowledge about mathematics teaching. Considerable international research has been undertaken in the last decade to develop our understanding of the nature of subject knowledge required for mathematics teaching. This research makes clear that the school-based model we have of initial teacher training (ITT) – which has many strengths – does not provide enough opportunity to work in-depth to develop mathematics knowledge for teaching. Further study for mathematics teachers must, therefore, provide more opportunity to develop such knowledge.

A focus on subject knowledge should not be left solely to teachers' choice or to institutional priorities, and we believe that the TDA should lead the way here in implementing the Expert Group's recommendations.

2. Early career focus

We are concerned that teachers will be studying for the MTL at a time when they should be developing basic competence and subject teaching knowledge. There are three problems with this:

- a. Teachers will be distracted from improving their own mathematics teaching towards other aspects of teaching;
- b. In their early careers, teachers need to develop a practice-based approach to their work but such a model runs the risk of failing to satisfy QAA requirements for masters-level work;
- c. Achieving a masters-level qualification in their early career will discourage further study of mathematics teaching at that level and funding for such courses may not be forthcoming as a result of the Equivalent or Lower Qualifications policy.

3. The effect on other M-level programmes

We have learnt recently that TDA funding for postgraduate professional development courses will cease from July 2012 for general and subject-based courses in favour of the MTL. Teachers wishing to study subject-based masters degrees will from then on have to pay full fees. This decision runs contrary to the Science and Learning Expert Group's findings about improving mathematics teaching throughout teachers' careers. We believe that funding should remain for at least STEM subject masters courses.

It appears therefore that the MTL is likely to lead to the demise of mathematics education masters-level courses across the country. This threatens the next generation of senior mathematics teachers and also mathematics education researchers – there will be no supply of experienced teachers with masters qualifications in mathematics education to provide informed leadership within and beyond schools. We fear that the MTL will replace an established and valuable provision with one that is much less effective.

We would ask that DCSF monitor this situation closely. The unintended but predictable outcome of this programme will be a generation of mathematics teachers who hold masters level qualifications but whose own subject-specific knowledge and practice has not been adequately developed – and never will be.

Yours sincerely

Professor Dame Julia Higgins FRS FREng

Chair, Advisory Committee on Mathematics Education (ACME)

cc Mr Vernon Coaker MP, Minister of State, DCSF