RESPONSE OF THE NATIONAL UNION OF TEACHERS TO THE TTA CONSULTATION ON STRENGTHENING THE ASSESSMENT OF TRAINEES FOR THE AWARD OF QUALIFIED TEACHER STATUS (QTS)

Introduction:

The National Union of Teachers welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the above consultation on strengthening the assessment of trainees for the award of QTS.

The NUT acknowledges this document forms a part of the wider TTA consultation on the proposed review of the existing requirements for ITT and the standards for QTS. It is of concern, however, that this consultation document appears to address QTS assessment as if it stands apart from the standards as set out in DfEE Circular 4/98 and the ITT process as a whole.

In its initial comments to the TTA letter which set out the purpose, principles, proposals and timetable for this monitoring and review exercise the NUT commented, “It is clear, however, that there is a need for the current set of standards to be ‘slimmed down’ in order that they can be applied equally and fairly on shorter graduate courses as well as four year courses. The current set of competencies are unmanageable in terms of allowing consistent and moderated assessment across all ITT courses and providers.”

The problems associated with the assessment of QTS are inherently due to the existing requirements for ITT and the standards for QTS. It is difficult, therefore, to comment on the practice of assessment of trainees for the award of QTS in isolation. The NUT believes that to review the issues related to the assessment of trainees for the award of QTS in such a discordant manner fails to recognise the need for a fuller indeed strategic review of ITT taking into account past, current and proposed adjustments to the system which exemplifies ‘joined up thinking’.

By failing to approach this strategically any changes will be embedded into a construction which has evolved rather than is designed. This would compound the haphazard manner in which changes have occurred over recent years and contribute to a situation which is neither optimum nor efficient. It is important that a holistic and developmental view is taken to any proposed changes to ITT.

The background to the consultation states that it originates from the DfEE’s Green Paper in which suggestions were put forward to strengthen the assessment of trainees for the award of QTS. The consultation document describes five options which “…span the spectrum from ‘no change’ through to the idea put forward in the Green Paper that the TTA could accredit all external examiners of initial teacher training courses”. The consultation in limiting the remit to following through these suggestions has taken a very pedestrian approach and does not constitute a strategic view.
The consultation document implies that this ‘persistent area of weakness’ (i.e. the difficulties concerning QTS assessment) in ITT is simply due to bad practice on behalf of the providers. Such a focus on the effects of the system rather than the system itself, in particular evident in the review of OFSTED inspection evidence, will not help in finding solutions.

Standards have too often appeared to be driven by a desire to create a sense of threat amongst providers rather than designed to support providers and promote the spread of good practice. The NUT believes that in considering national criteria and guidelines within ITT the overall objective should be to ensure pedagogic understanding through development of teaching skills.

The plethora of subject guidance has the potential to confuse as well skew the emphasis of those working within ITT. By way of example core subjects such as maths are covered by DfEE Circular 4/98, the National Numeracy Strategy, the National Curriculum and the documentation associated with the maths skill test. The NUT is concerned that there should be an urgent move towards coherence and consistency of ITT guidance.

The NUT believes that ITT is the starting point of teachers’ professional development which should continue throughout a career. This should be recognised in prioritising the objectives of teacher training and in recognising the benefits of establishing the essential limitations of ITT.

The importance of self-evaluation by ITT providers and teachers is not referred to in the consultation document. In terms of assessment throughout ITT and in awarding QTS a process of self-evaluation should be facilitated so that all those involved gain confidence by learning at a deeper level from their experience.

There is an undoubted lack of funding for partnership schools which needs to be addressed to ensure a positive professional involvement in ITT. Costing should take into account supply cover to allow for sufficient time for effective planning and liaison. The quality of ITT, and in particular of the potential impact of external assessor reports, will be dependent on the level of resources available. The TTA must not seek to underplay the influence of the level of funding available on the part that schools play in ITT and QTS assessment.

**Specific Comments**

**Option 1: No further changes to the current system**

It is apparent that the existing requirements for ITT and the standards for QTS are considered unmanageable by many providers. Whilst the NUT is opposed to any overall reduction in the standards required to qualify as a teacher, the assessment requirement must be credible and realistic.
The overarching criterion for the development of any system of assessment should be the effectiveness of that assessment in contributing to the improvement of teaching and learning.

Option 2: Guidance on and dissemination of effective practice in relation to the internal and external assessment of trainees for the award of QTS.

The NUT welcomes the proposal to draw up a ‘code of practice’ for the internal assessment of QTS if, as is proposed, this guidance is informed by and draws on the most effective practice amongst providers. A ‘code of practice’ or assessment framework would help ensure greater consistency of assessment across all ITT courses. It will be important, however, for providers to be able to access a ‘bank’ of best practice materials which take in account the context in which they have evolved.

It is important for any such guidance to emphasise the attitudes and values essential to establishing motivating relationships. There should be a non-hierarchical approach to those involved in ITT which recognises all participants as professionals and where each role is seen as an equivalent component of the overall process so that professional dialogue between all those involved can flourish. The environment in which assessment is carried out should be a positive one in which development can be optimised. Moreover encouraging positive links would discourage a punitive stance being taken by assessors.

Option 3: National criteria/guidelines for the appointment, remit and role of external examiners/assessors

The criteria on page 8 seem reasonable and such guidelines should, in theory improve practice. Especially pertinent is the point made on page 9 that “examiners be drawn from schools as well as HEIs to give an appropriate balance to external examiner teams”.

It is of concern to the NUT that the independent review of external assessors (carried out by Jim Sweetman and Associates) found significant differences in use of assessors by different courses. The consultation paper, however, makes no reference to the wide variety of routes into teaching to which QTS assessment must be applicable.

Assessment should be an interactive process through which consultation develops greater understanding by using professional judgement. In the right environment the external assessor should be involved in the assessment process at the earliest opportunity and should aim to engender confidence in all those involved. An assessment process which is ongoing and wide ranging could include self-assessment, internal assessment, external assessment and a review cycle.

In emphasising the impact of external assessment the consultation document presents this as separate from the rest of the assessment process. The
assessment process should be an integrated one within which there are distinctions which allow constructive criticism to be discussed. External assessment offers the opportunity for an objective perspective of the work of the provider and trainee. This view provides the chance for response and professional debate which may or may not result in change. It should lead to improvement rather than an over-emphasis on accountability.

The current ITT structures such as DfEE Circular 4/98 and initiatives such as the QTS skills tests drive ITT away from a pedagogic understanding towards one where knowledge of content is paramount. The fact identified by the Independent Review that external assessment often takes place without reference to DfEE Circular 4/98 may well reflect the fact that within the guidance document there is a lack of focus on how children learn and develop which fails those who are looking for proof of pedagogic skill; the result being difficulty in establishing obvious links between assessment reports and DfEE Circular 4/98.

It is certainly essential that headteachers, teachers and those from minority ethnic groups should be ‘encouraged’ to be involved. The lack of diversity in those working in QTS assessment is of concern to the NUT. Although the independent review identifies this issue there is no further indication within the consultation paper of how this will be addressed. Where the issue is referred to within the consultation paper it appears to be supplementary to considerations for instance by being placed in brackets. Mere acknowledgement will not be sufficient to bring about significant changes. How they can be encouraged is a crucial question that must be resolved if teacher/headteachers, especially those from minority ethnic groups, are to contribute their practical experience to the training and assessment process.

The recruitment evidence in the independent review shows a system that depends on institutional ‘cross flow’ to recruit. This can only contribute to bias. To replace this with a system that is based on inclusive and objective criteria for recruitment is welcome. The process and criteria for recruitment should be carefully considered so that recruitment is as representative as possible. For instance the current practice of basing recruitment criteria on experience of academic research with the emphasis on published work, considerably narrows the field.

Training and recruitment criteria should not be imposed such that it deters or discourages but should be constructed so that it is a route of choice taken by assessors. The role of external assessors should be accessible rather than overwhelming so as to encourage a wide pool of applicants.

Option 4: Training external examiners/assessors in the assessment of trainees against the QTS standards; and/or formal recognition of the expertise of existing external examiners/assessors

The availability of high quality training for external assessors would be welcome in providing opportunities to share good practice and to develop
consistency in judgements. The detail of the training programme would be crucial to ensuring a positive approach to carrying out assessment.

The offer of training for examiners/assessors will be crucial to recruiting external examiners. The questions posed by the TTA on page 10 of the consultation document are complex. How might training be organised is a question that needs to be initially answered by those already providing training so that high quality practice can be identified.

**Option 5: Setting up a national register of external examiners/assessors with the possibility of training and accrediting all external examiners involved with the assessment of trainees for the award of QTS**

Accreditation of assessors offers some obvious advantages in particular in the availability of a register of accredited assessors. The NUT is concerned to stress that a model of accreditation should be manageable and based on the premise of positively enhancing a career in education rather setting up barriers to those who may be eligible.

**Conclusion**

The NUT believes that the consultation on strengthening the assessment of trainees for the award of QTS illustrates the reactive approach that is being taken to the significant weaknesses that have developed in ITT overall. It is unlikely that such an approach will provide high quality results. The NUT would welcome a more proactive and holistic approach which enables long-term benefits to this complex and demanding field of work. The TTA is urged to address the weaknesses in the assessment of trainees for the award of QTS strategically thus ensuring high quality, timely and sufficiently funded enhancement of ITT.

Given the current workload carried by those working in education a supportive structure that dispels uncertainty and ensures coherence in awarding QTS would be welcome. There is some guidance in place for the assessment of trainees, for instance the QAA’s Code of Practice on External Examining of Academic Courses and the DfEE Circular 4/98, but there is clearly not the integrated support that is needed to result in consistent interpretation and implementation. The NUT would therefore urge that there be a fuller consultation which takes a broad view of ITT and continued professional development.