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Teaching is suddenly cool — and we only take the best

Rachel Sylvester and Alice Thomson

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Teach First has one of the toughest entrance requirements: only one in 15 graduates who apply are chosen for this elite corps

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deprived areas, imbued with the Force, determined to change children's lives. His company, [Teach First](#), has become a phenomenon in British education.

It is now not only the largest graduate recruiter in Britain but also has one of the toughest entrance requirements: only one in 15 graduates who apply are chosen for this elite corps.

When 12 years ago Mr Wigdortz took the idea from America of putting high-flying graduates in front of classes after only six weeks of training, he never thought that it would be this successful.

“Even Pricewaterhouse doesn't take as many graduates,” he said in a rare interview. “But we set a really high bar. We recruit people from any university but we are incredibly strict about only selecting people who meet a certain level of self-confidence and academic aptitude, who have real ability and leadership qualities.”

Nearly 80 per cent come from the Russell Group of 24 leading universities, but they are not all Oxbridge starred firsts from public schools. “Many of our recruits were on free school meals but happened to have one inspirational teacher; they just want to put something back into the system,” Mr Wigdortz said.



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His goal is to recruit 1,500 teachers this year to go into struggling schools. But he admits: “We are probably going to be

It is this obsession with taking only the best that has both fascinated and horrified people about Teach First. Mr Wigdortz doesn't care. "It's amazing that in 12 years we are now in a situation where the best graduates are turning to teaching as their first choice of career," he says. "We have always been determined to be like any really top recruiter and now we are finding that the best don't all want to rush into the City to make loads of money, they are more altruistic and teaching is suddenly cool."

Learning to teach, Mr Wigdortz believes, sets you up for life as well as helping the next generation. "We come with the firm belief that the best leaders are teachers and teaching is the best profession to learn to be a leader. If you are a graduate who wants to lead, then start by leading in the classroom. You need to be really exceptional to teach well, especially in low-income schools.

"This is serious, it's about changing children's lives, it's a huge commitment. You are trying to lead all these children to a better, richer, more interesting place."

An American, Mr Wigdortz often sounds evangelical about Teach First. He sends his recruits out into schools where he believes they are most needed and hopes that they will convert pupils into high achievers like themselves.

"It used to be inner cities that needed our teachers, but increasingly it's the seaside towns where there is most deprivation and poverty of aspiration," he says. "You are now more likely to do well on free school meals in an inner city than in a coastal town where you are not on free school meals."

The English school system has become "a two-tier system", he thinks. "You have London and some of the big cities and they are beginning to show really good results and the systems are coming in place to deliver great education, you have pockets of

Manchester, the country has stagnated and in some cases gone backwards in the last 20 years.”

To counteract this, he has decided to send the majority of this year’s cohort into the towns and countryside. “We are now placing teachers in areas like Bournemouth, Hartlepool and Hastings. We only work in schools where the majority of kids come from low- income communities but we go anywhere. There are 1,000 secondary schools that meet our criteria and this year we are going to be in 700 of them. We don’t just want to be a niche, we want to make a real difference.”

Teach First, he says, isn’t just for two years it’s for life. “We are trying to create a movement of leaders who see educational disadvantage as the most important issue in their life and facing the country. They need to be evangelical. 15,000 people have been through the programme in 12 years, we call them ambassadors.” These ambassadors are now spreading the message.

“We have over 100 assistant teachers, 18 head teachers, 30 charity chief executives and lots of business leaders,” Mr Wigdortz said. “Nearly 90 per cent are still engaged with us, supporting our philosophy, I want all the leaders in Britain to see educational disadvantage as the most important long-term challenge facing Britain that they want to fix.” Several Teach First ambassadors are now working in the Department for Education, helping ministers.

More than two thirds stay on in the classroom after their two-year commitment. “Nearly 25 per cent go into the business world and that’s great if they continue the message there — after two years you know your strengths.”

The charity, which receives £11.6 million in grants from the government, is supplying nearly a quarter of the 7,000 new teachers who go into low-income schools each year. They could provide more, but Brett says Teach First isn’t right for everyone.

thrown in the deep end very quickly, we give you lots of support but it is hard and you have to be exceptional, quick, communicative, inspirational.”

Some graduates, he suggests, would prefer to take a more traditional route. “There are probably lots of other different ways of becoming teachers that will suit them better.”

It must infuriate him when people leave after all the attention focused on them. “We have this old-school mythology that people choose a career and stick to it for life, that they can’t change and move and adapt. Graduates don’t wait for years now for a gold watch, you don’t want to stay at one school your whole life, so I don’t mind,” Mr Wigdortz says. “The young now want to move around and accept new challenges. Teach First heads have often gone into business and then come back with more knowledge and expertise. That’s not a bad thing for schools or children.”

Kate Forbes, who was one of the first cohort in 2004, is one of many ambassadors who explained to us that they had become addicted to teaching and couldn’t change careers. Now deputy head teacher at the Bourne Academy in Bournemouth, she was thinking of doing marketing or consultancy when someone told her about Teach First.

“Few people aspired to be teachers when I started, now it’s incredibly popular. I didn’t really want to be a teacher. But then you end up doing something that was a million times harder than you expected and you’re crying in the staff toilets to your mum, thinking why did I do this? It completely broke me down into my constituent parts so that I could be put back together again, but with added humility and resilience,” she says.

“I signed up because I was young, selfish and thought I could change the world, and I stayed because I love it and I’m generally good at it and young adults are wandering around with qualifications and confidence that they wouldn’t have had

“The Teach First process instilled in me a genuine care for addressing inequality, particularly that all students deserve effort, care and numerous second chances from adults. So I will always teach, but particularly I will always teach where good teachers are needed most.”

Defectors are difficult to find, but one who did leave explained that she couldn't cope with the “survival of the fittest model” at Teach First. “Even the most cut-throat City institutions nurture graduate trainees during their first few weeks.

“Not so with Teach First; it's seen as a rite of passage to fail abysmally in the first few months. Teach First ambassadors talk proudly about the difficulties they had to start with — the high workload, the lack of sleep, hostility from colleagues, daily mistakes — and how they fought through these and lived to teach another day.”

She had only 20 minutes in front of a class during her training before starting at her school. “Disaster, hilarity — or it is now the shakes have worn off — ensued: I had pupils refusing to follow instructions, hiding under furniture or climbing on top of it, running up and down the corridors, fighting one another and swearing. It was a long, painful and pretty traumatic journey from this first lesson to the stage where I could teach a class competently.”

The idea, however, has been seen as so successful in Britain and America that it is now expanding to Chile, Bulgaria and Uganda.

“I think that it's the most difficult graduate job out there,” Mr Wigdortz admits. “This isn't a job for the faint of heart. You need to have lots of resilience. We look for respect, humility, lots of skills. I think many people would struggle with it.” But he adds, “For those who get it, you have the chance to transform children's lives, and that is an amazing achievement.”

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