

## **PGCE Survival Guide**

**Mike Lamb studied a PGCE at the University of Sussex in 2007/8. Despite a huge amount of information available to support students throughout the course, he identified a lack of information provided directly by students for students. Then with the support of the university and ESCalate he carried out a small research project to highlight the key pieces of advice that this year's students thought essential information for future students. Below is a synopsis of what he discovered with comments provided by students from the University of Sussex.**

It's a common refrain among students and new teachers that the PGCE is the hardest year of their lives. Without doubt, it is an intense course. The combination of teaching practice and academic work tests a number of the essential skills required to be a teacher.

I asked fellow trainees, who have also just completed their PGCE what they thought. More than half said it had been the hardest year of their lives. Comments ranged from: *"It took over my whole life"*, to: *"I felt more tired than I ever thought humanly possible"*. So, what did they wish they'd known at the start of the course, and what tips did they have for future trainees?

### **It is easy to become submerged**

You need a good balance between the course and life outside. You can spend every minute of your precious weekends planning lessons for the week ahead, but without outside interests, you will become a boring and unhappy teacher (and person).

Arrange a regular weekly night out and keep up any sports or hobbies. As one ex-trainee said to me: *"Make a real effort to meet up with old friends - they've provided me with endless support - and wine."*

### **Course friends can be lifesavers**

When you can't find that lesson resource at midnight on a Tuesday and are beginning to panic, a friend on the other end of the phone is invaluable. Befriending other trainees early on will pay dividends later on. An essential source of everything from a supportive shoulder to cry on, to useful lesson resources, course mates are also often more than happy to indulge in mutual moaning.

Swap contact details and join socials when time allows. Remember, they're the people who know what you're going through.

### **Take control of paperwork**

The PGCE could almost double up as a qualification in administration. Between school, university and evidence files (and the other paperwork), it pays to be organised from day one.

Losing course forms is at best embarrassing and at worst could mean a delay in achieving Qualified Teacher Status or jeopardise your qualification. Learn to prioritise - there is not enough time to be a perfectionist. One trainee's advice was: *"Buy some lever arch folders and plastic pockets and start filing everything regularly."*

### **Appreciate school placements**

Get involved and use your initiative. Avoid being labelled as "the trainee", who starts late, leaves early and isn't part of the school. This is important if you want to get the most out of your school placement.

You will get on better if you help out with clubs and sports. You form better relationships with the children, and staff (and often parents) will see you in a different light.

Helping out at science club let me have fun with the pupils, and gave me the opportunity to interact with parents who came to collect their children. Don't take on too much though - you also have to learn when to say no.

### **Win your colleagues over**

Many trainees complain about the support they receive from their school- based mentors. However, if you want to ensure they help you later, make a concerted effort early on.

Your school placements are rather like extended interviews. Perform well and you are likely to be in demand at that school, and possibly others. Try to form an effective relationship with your head of year, mentor, class teacher, teaching assistants and colleagues. Don't forget the people who run the school, such as the caretakers, dinner ladies and receptionists.

### **Make a good impression**

Try to be confident, assertive, fair and consistent. If you get this wrong at the start, it is likely to lead to a more boisterous and disruptive class. Standing in front of a class can be daunting, but if you are prepared, that will help. Find out as much about your classes as you can beforehand, and observe how other teachers work with them.

Make sure you are aware of an array of behavior management techniques and the school or departmental behaviour policy. *"Learn names as quickly as possible - and use them for praise,"* advised one trainee.

### **Don't over-plan your lessons**

Be prepared, but don't overdo it. Try to minimise that sick and stressed- out feeling you get when you walk into a lesson you haven't planned for properly. At the beginning of a PGCE it can take hours to plan.

Try to reduce this slowly - some teachers recommend no more than one hour of planning

for one hour of teaching as a guideline. Don't reinvent the wheel - there are resources available through your colleagues, your department and online.

Spend your time early on finding out where to access these resources. I once planned the "perfect" lesson in detail, only to discover the class had covered it already. Other times, your plans are not appropriate and you have to think on your feet. Prepare carefully, but remember that you have to be flexible.

### **Stay healthy**

The PGCE is the equivalent of taking part in a year-long clinical disease test. It is essential to keep healthy, if you don't want to spend most of your training year sniffing, coughing and feeling exhausted.

Allegedly after two years in teaching you develop a cast-iron immune system. Keep up those exercise classes, eat and sleep properly and don't overdo the alcohol. If possible, plan at least one day a weekend off. *"Home-cooked meals, vitamin C, echinacea and walks down the seafront got me through this year,"* says one fellow trainee.

### **Don't forget why you're doing it**

Remember why you wanted to become a teacher. I wanted to work with people in a dynamic environment where I felt I could make a real difference.

Keep smiling, employ your sense of humour and wait until you get home to moan - there are enough teachers moaning in the staffroom already