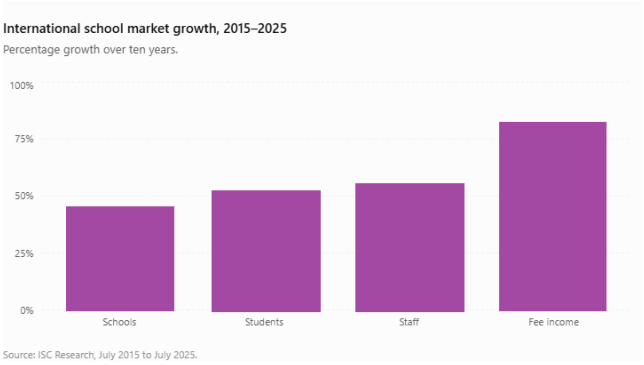
The Global Teacher Squeeze: Is Supply Keeping Up with International School Demand?

For international schools looking for experienced British and American teachers, there is some good news. Unfortunately, there is also quite a lot of competition.



The international school sector continues to grow. ISC Research recorded 15,075 international schools educating 7.6 million students in July 2025, supported by around 730,500 staff. Over the previous decade, school numbers increased by 45%, student numbers by 51% and staff numbers by 54%.

That creates an obvious question. Where will all those additional teachers come from?

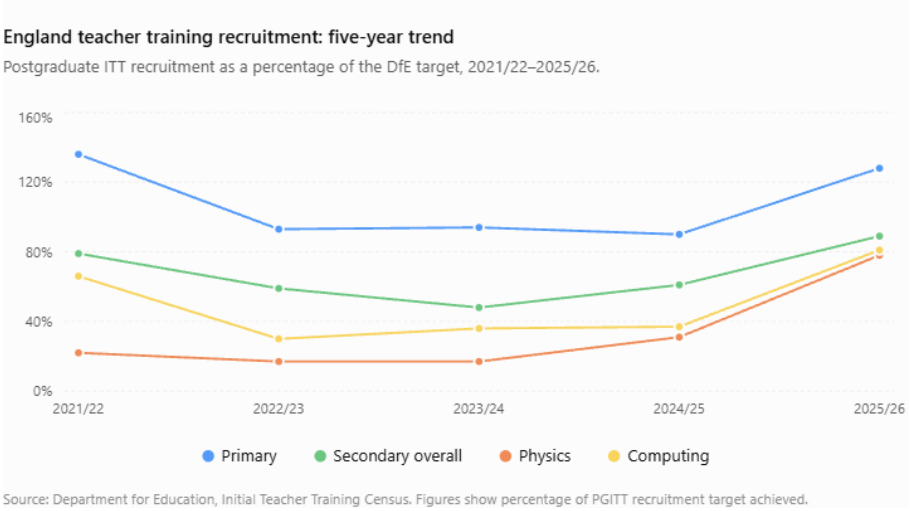
The UK picture is improving – but look behind the headline

England had a surprisingly strong teacher-training year in 2025/26. Postgraduate primary recruitment reached 9,815 trainees, equivalent to 128% of the Department for Education target. Secondary recruitment increased by 13% to 17,174 trainees and reached 89% of target.

However, the five-year picture is more revealing.

Primary recruitment was above target in 2021/22 before falling below it for three consecutive years. Secondary recruitment fell to just 48% of target in 2023/24 before recovering sharply.

The situation has been particularly difficult in some of the subjects that international schools find hardest to recruit. Physics recruitment was only 17% of target in both 2022/23 and 2023/24. Computing was also well below target. Both improved significantly in 2025/26, reaching 78% and 81% respectively.



Thus, while the pipeline is improving this year, several years of under-recruitment cannot be reversed overnight and the effects will be felt for years particularly when international schools prefer teachers with 2 or more years of experience.

There is another interesting twist for the longer term.

Falling birth rates mean domestic demand is beginning to soften. England's primary teacher workforce fell by 1.3% in 2025/26 as pupil numbers declined, and government projections anticipate primary teacher demand falling further. This could potentially make British primary

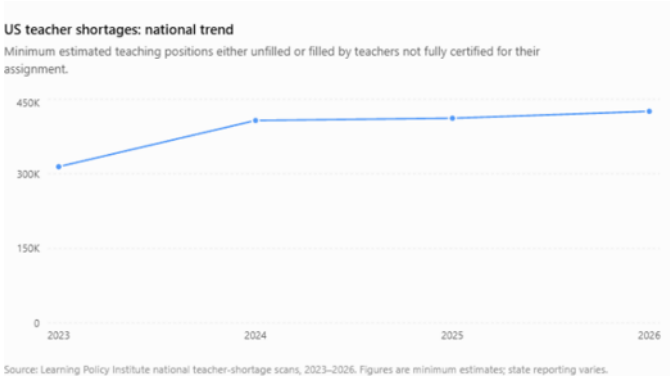
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teachers somewhat easier for international schools to attract provided they are being trained in sufficient numbers, more than England needs domestically.

Early Years is different again. England recruited only 542 new Early Years Initial Teacher Training entrants in 2025/26, down **7% year-on-year**. Schools should therefore be cautious about assuming that qualified Early Years specialists will be plentiful, and Early Years / Kindergarten is where many international schools start or expand first.

Across the Atlantic, the squeeze looks tighter

The US picture is arguably more concerning. The Learning Policy Institute's minimum estimate of teaching positions either vacant or filled by teachers who were not fully certified for their assignment increased from around **314,000 in 2023 to more than 425,000 in 2026 – an increase of approximately 35%.**



That doesn't mean 425,000 American classrooms are without teachers. In the 2026 estimate, around 37,600 positions were actually unfilled and approximately 387,800 were occupied by teachers who were not fully certified for the assignment. This is concerning when international schools and Ministries of Education often require degrees and certification that matches one’s teaching subject.

These figures demonstrate the pressure within the domestic recruitment market. The total represents roughly one in eight US teaching positions filled by teachers working outside their trained subject, and the true figure may be higher because state reporting varies.

The shortages aren't evenly distributed. Subjects like special education, science and mathematics remain particularly difficult areas, mirroring worldwide trends. For 2024/25, 45 states reported shortages in special education, 41 in science and 40 in mathematics. Thus, for international schools recruiting US-certified teachers in these areas, the competition is not simply coming from other international schools - they are competing against a domestic school system that needs those same people.

Meanwhile, international demand keeps growing

Competition for the best teachers is unlikely to disappear. Whilst the number of international schools globally increased by 45% in the decade to July 2025 and staff numbers by 54%, the growth is not unform.

The Middle East and South-Eastern Asia each recorded approximately 11% growth in international school numbers over the five years to 2025 and the Middle East alone now has more than 2,300 international schools, with further schools planned.

China, once one of the great engines of international-school expansion, has faced regulatory and demographic headwinds slowing demand, while Europe represents a more mature and generally slower-growing market.

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Could the cost-of-living crisis push more teachers overseas?

There is one factor that could potentially affect the supply of internationally mobile teachers: the cost of living.

Teachers in the UK and US have not been immune to rising housing, energy, food and childcare costs. For some, that makes the financial proposition of working internationally considerably more interesting – particularly where a school offers accommodation or a housing allowance, medical insurance, annual flights and a tax-free or low-tax salary. Indeed, more than 120,000 UK teachers applied for overseas positions through Tes during 2025, with the UAE and Qatar among the most popular destinations.

But there is a catch.

The cost-of-living crisis doesn't necessarily make teachers less expensive to recruit. It can make them **more financially discerning**.

Candidates are increasingly looking at the headline salary and asking what they will actually have left at the end of the month? How much does suitable accommodation cost? Does the housing allowance genuinely cover it? What are school fees for dependants? How expensive are flights home? Is medical insurance comprehensive? Financial motivations are paramount to teachers looking overseas now. The cost of living in the US and UK has risen 7% in the past 2 years, whereas salaries at international schools have remained largely stagnant.

The result is an interesting paradox. Economic pressure at home may encourage more teachers to **consider** an international move, while simultaneously making them much more selective about the jobs and destinations they will **accept**.

What does this mean for international schools?

The teacher shortage hasn't disappeared. It has become more nuanced.

British primary recruitment is recovering and declining domestic pupil numbers could eventually release some capacity into the international market, or it may result in fewer teachers being trained. British secondary recruitment has also improved considerably, although shortages remain in important specialist subjects – STEM, Early Years, Computing and Languages.

The US picture is less encouraging. Domestic schools continue to experience substantial difficulties finding appropriately qualified teachers, particularly in special education, science and mathematics.

At the same time, international schools need more teachers than they did ten years ago and teachers and school leaders are more financially discerning leading to more challenges for schools that have lower salaries or less comprehensive packages, regardless of the cost of living. The schools that succeed will increasingly be those that recognise recruitment for what it is: a competition. Attractive packages matter, but so do speed, flexibility, realistic requirements and a candidate-friendly recruitment process.

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Most importantly, schools need to distinguish between the overall supply of teachers and the supply of **the teachers they actually want**.

There may be thousands of teachers qualifying every year but that doesn't necessarily mean there are more teachers with the curriculum experience an international school requires, teaching the subject they need, at the experience level they want – who are also willing to relocate to a particular country.

And that distinction is likely to define international teacher recruitment over the next few years.

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