Do educational results suffer in schools where there is a high turnover among the teaching staff? Shqiponja Telhaj and colleagues explore this question by analysing data from all state secondary schools in England.

Does teacher turnover affect young people’s academic achievement?

Hiring and retaining good teachers has been a persistent policy concern in the UK. There is a general belief among researchers and policy-makers that teacher turnover harms school students’ achievement. That is why a 2012 report by the House of Commons Education Committee concluded that recruitment and retention of outstanding teachers should be at the top of the educational reform agenda. But there is little known about the impact of teacher turnover on academic attainment.

Teachers gain experience and promotion through job search and changing schools, but this turnover might have a direct impact on young people. Teacher turnover may matter for their achievement because of the variable quality of teachers to whom they are exposed: they might lose a good teacher and gain a bad one, or vice-versa.

Teacher turnover may also matter because it disrupts learning in a number of ways: it can result in a loss of expertise within the school; teaching quality may be affected by the time required for the new teachers to acclimatise and assimilate into a school; and turnover may break continuity in learning as different teachers adopt different approaches and teach in different ways. Relationships between teachers and students may also be weaker.

If teacher turnover does harm learning, then there is a potential case for providing incentives to encourage the retention of teachers or to compensate schools with additional resources when turnover is high.

The lack of appropriate data linking the performance of individual students and schools to teacher turnover has made it difficult to investigate whether high teacher mobility has an impact. Until recently, research on this issue has mainly examined factors associated with higher turnover,

Higher teacher turnover has a moderately negative impact on school students’ attainment in their GCSEs.
finding that schools serving disadvantaged young people have higher turnover than other schools. It is also worth noting that most of these studies have based their findings on small-scale surveys or cross-sectional data.

The key question we answer in our research is whether (and to what extent) teacher turnover affects academic progress in state secondary schools in England. We use unique administrative data for the period 1995 to 2013 covering all state secondary schools in England. Data on teachers are matched with achievement data for individuals and schools at the end of compulsory schooling at age 16.

To examine the effects of different types of movers, we use alternative measures of teacher turnover: entry from other schools; entry into the teaching workforce; exit from schools; and exit from the profession. We also examine turnover rates by teacher characteristics, age, experience, gender and salary.

We estimate the net impact on academic attainment of school entry and exit rates over two years prior to students taking their final year 11 exams, the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).

Descriptive statistics suggest that teacher turnover is indeed an issue for state secondary schools in England. Figure 1 reports annual rates of entry and exit between 1995 and 2015. As Panel A shows, entry rates have been consistently high throughout this period. Overall, exit rates (Panel B) show similar patterns, with the number of teachers leaving the profession steadily rising over time too.

Turnover also varies by teacher characteristics: part-time teachers, young teachers and teachers with fewer than five years of experience are the ones who move more. For example, exit rates for teachers with fewer than five years of experience are about 60% higher than exit rates of more experienced teachers (21% compared with 14%).

Similarly, exit rates for teachers aged between 20 and 29 are almost twice the exit rates of teachers aged between 40 and 49 (19.5% compared with 11.5%). Teachers with the lowest salaries (first and second quartile) move twice as often as those with higher salaries.

Figure 1:
Turnover in secondary schools

Panel A: Average entry rate

Panel B: Average exit rate
This article summarises ‘Does Teacher Turnover Affect Student Academic Achievement?’, a forthcoming paper by Shqiponja Telhaj, Steve Gibbons and Vincenzo Scrutinio.

Shqiponja Telhaj of the University of Sussex is a research associate in CEP’s education and skills programme. Steve Gibbons is professor of economic geography at LSE and director of CEP’s urban and spatial programme. Vincenzo Scrutinio is an occasional research assistant in CEP’s community programme.

Figure 2: The effects of teacher entry from other schools and outside the teaching profession on schools’ share of students achieving five or more A*-C GCSEs

Resources should be directed at retaining teachers at schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.