



## **Progress off-track:**

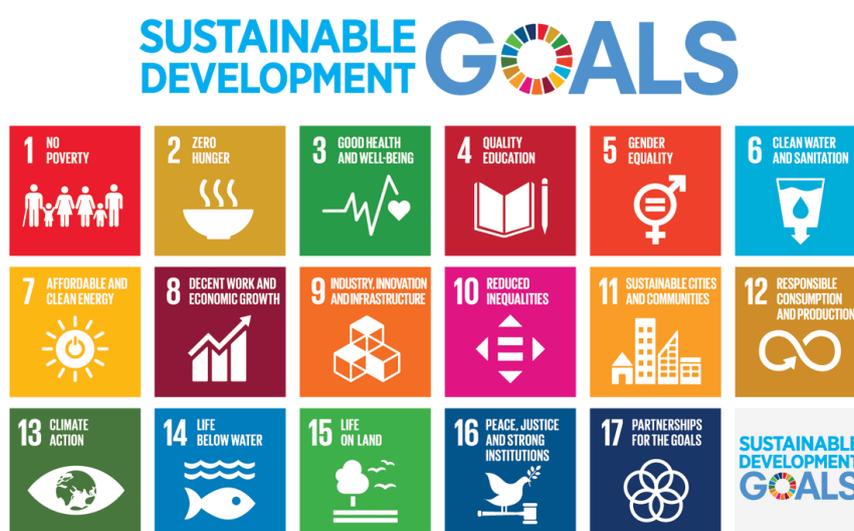
**A snapshot review of progress in the UK  
on education and social justice in relation to the  
Sustainable Development Goals**



# Progress off-track: A snapshot review of progress in the UK on education and social justice in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals

## Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals are a set of 17 Goals and 169 Targets agreed upon by world leaders in 2015, setting the course of development through to 2030. The Goals cover everything from gender equality to the blue economy, and many topics in between. Two underpinning principles of the SDGs are global applicability and leaving no one behind. But is the UK on-track to realising all the SDGs while maintaining these principles?



The United Kingdom is the fifth largest economy in the world. With a high per-capita GDP and a strong democratic governance structure, it is reasonable to expect that the country would be well on-track to achieving the SDGs domestically.

This year, 2019, presents a perfect opportunity to assess if this expected trajectory is coming to fruition. For the first time, the UK will be submitting a Voluntary National Review (VNR) of its progress on the SDGs at the United Nations' High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). The theme of this year's HLPF is *Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality*, with SDG4 (education), SDG8 (decent work), SDG10 (reduce inequalities), and SDG16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) some of the goals to be reviewed in depth. Given this theme, this briefing adopts a similar focus and provides a snapshot of the UK's progress on education and social justice.

## Parameters

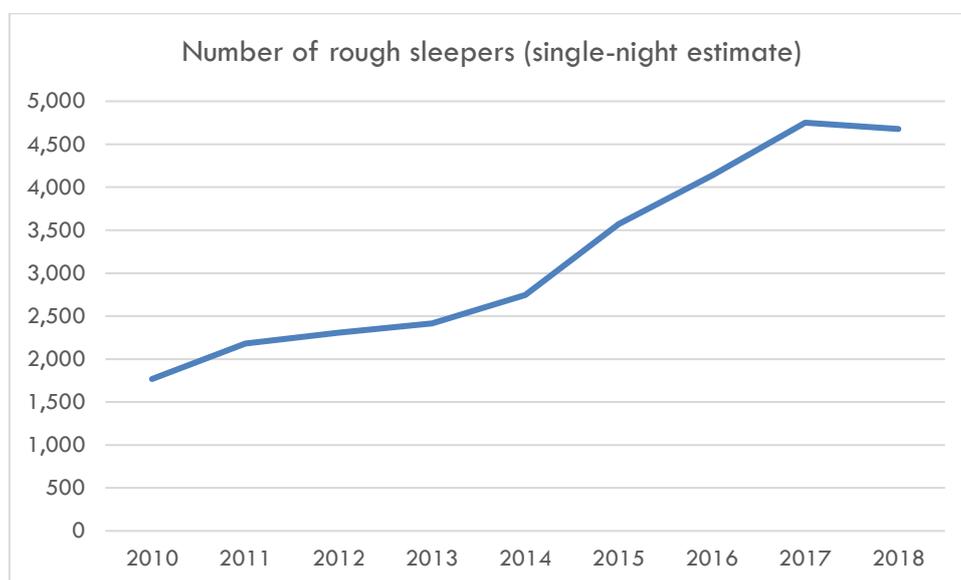
In the interest of brevity, this briefing will not cover all targets and indicators associated with education and social justice. The briefing aims to give a snapshot of the UK's progress on the SDGs that relate to these issues, rather than an exhaustive analysis of all Goals, Targets and Indicators. The

NEU acknowledges that this restricted approach will naturally have some limitations, but we believe that it does show some worrying trends.

## SDG1: No Poverty

SDG1 sets states the ambitious goal to *end poverty in all its forms everywhere*. A base layer of poverty in any society is to be expected, but this stated goal means leaders must tackle the problem of poverty within their borders comprehensively and impactfully.

Target 1.1 calls on states to *eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day*. In the UK, 0.2% of the population lives below \$1.90 per day – suggesting that absolute poverty is minimal in the UK.<sup>i</sup> However, using a proxy for extreme poverty, such as rough sleeping, paints a bleak picture of the UK’s achievement on this goal. Rough sleeping is hugely on the rise in the UK and is now 31% higher than in 2015 (the start of the SDGs).<sup>ii</sup>



The UK is also falling behind in relation to Target 1.2, which calls on governments to *reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions*. Within these parameters, the picture is much different. Since 2014/15, the number of people living in relative low income (before housing costs) has increased by one million.<sup>iii</sup> Specifically, child poverty has been on the rise since 2010.<sup>iv</sup> Children remain much more likely to live in households at risk of poverty – 21.1% of those under 16, compared with 16.1% of those aged over 16.<sup>v</sup> Furthermore, a higher proportion of women are in households at risk of poverty, with 17.9% of women versus 16.1% for men.<sup>vi</sup> This illustrates clearly that the goal to reduce the proportion of citizens living in poverty in the UK is far off track in relation to Target 1.2.

With both rough sleeping and poverty increasing, it seems that the UK is far off-track from achieving SDG1 – and the situation is not improving.

The Government has chosen to focus on employment as the route out of poverty, an approach criticised by the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty Philip Alston. In a 2018 report, Alston wrote “British compassion for those who are suffering has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous approach apparently designed to...impose a rigid order on the lives of

those least capable of coping in today's world."<sup>vii</sup> This is despite Target 1.3 which calls on states to *implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measure for all*.

Additionally, Alston criticised the Government's roll-out of Universal Credit, noting that "many aspects of the [Universal Credit] design and rollout of the programme have suggested that the Department for Work and Pensions is more concerned with making economic savings and sending messages about lifestyles than responding to the multiple needs of those living with a disability, job loss, housing insecurity, illness, and the demands of parenting."<sup>viii</sup> The issue of the five-week gap in Universal Credit payments and the digital barrier to access both further problematise the full realisation of SDG1 through this structure. The digital barrier, for example, does not support Target 1.4 – *to ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services*. The insistence on Universal Credit and work for benefits sees the UK fall behind in delivering SDG1.

## SDG2: Zero Hunger

The second SDG calls on states to *end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture*. In its "Emerging Findings" document, the Government chose to focus on the "improved nutrition" element of this Goal, noting that policies such as the Soft Drinks Industry Levy and Healthy Food Scheme are in place to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity. The document notes that childhood obesity saw an increase of 3.2% between 2015/16 and 2016/17.<sup>ix</sup>

While obesity is an important topic to tackle, it is also important to address the crisis of child hunger in the UK. To ignore this is to ignore Target 2.1 to *end hunger and ensure access by all people...to safe nutritious and enough food all year round*.

According to the Trussell Trust, a network of food banks in the UK, 1.6 million packs of food supplies were provided in the 2018/2019 period – a 19% increase from the previous year.<sup>x</sup> Looking at hunger and education specifically, a 2018 NEU study found that more than half of respondents had students in their schools who experienced holiday hunger, with nearly 80% noting that it was failing to improve.<sup>xi</sup> One teacher noted that "I see children come back to school in September looking visibly less well nourished."<sup>xii</sup>

Even teachers themselves have been forced to use food banks – NEU Joint President Kim Knappet reported in 2019 that she has seen teachers visit the food bank where she volunteers.<sup>xiii</sup> These shocking facts are at odds with the UK's stated ambition to achieve the SDGs and leave no one behind.

## SDG4: Quality Education

As an education union, it follows that our greatest concern would be with the Government's progress on SDG4, to *ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*. While the UK has a solid and structured education system, there remain key issues to address in ensuring that all children receive the free, quality education they were promised.<sup>xiv</sup> Three particular areas of concern are Targets 4.6, 4.7 and 4.c.

## Target 4.6 – Literacy and Numeracy

Target 4.6 seeks to *ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy*. England<sup>1</sup> lags far behind on literacy, however, with “9 million working aged adults in England (more than a quarter of adults aged 16-65) with low literacy or numeracy skills or both.”<sup>xv</sup> The picture is the same for young people: “At every qualification level, low basic skills are more common among young people in England than in many other countries”, with one-third of 16-19-year-olds having low basic skills.<sup>xvi</sup> This sets England at the very bottom of developed OECD countries for literacy and second only to the United States in low numeracy skills.<sup>xvii</sup> This problem must be tackled as a matter of urgency.

## Target 4.7 – Global Citizenship Education

Target 4.7 explores global citizenship education (GCED), asking governments to support learners to develop *the knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development*. Despite the Secretary of State for Education’s assertion that “There are many opportunities in and out of school for young people to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development and global citizenship”, there are in fact many barriers to these opportunities.<sup>xviii</sup> GCED is not valued in the curriculum, has no strategic direction and relies too heavily on individual schools’ and teachers’ commitment. A 2019 survey by the NEU found that nearly 1/3 of respondents felt “not at all” prepared to incorporate GCED into their practice and over 35% felt that funding cuts had negatively impacted on GCED in their school.<sup>xix</sup>

Furthermore, the Connecting Classrooms through Global Learning Programme, the successor to the Global Learning Programme (GLP) which ended in 2018, lacks ambition and represents a reduced commitment since the GLP. It has a disappointing lack of reference to social justice and could employ a stronger focus on critical pedagogy.<sup>xx</sup>

Finally, to suggest that “The national curriculum is just one element in the wide-ranging education of every child and there is enough time and space in the school day and year to expand beyond the national curriculum specifications”, as the Secretary of State did in answer to a Parliamentary Question, is simply disingenuous.<sup>xxi</sup> Teachers have consistently lamented the narrowed curriculum, strict timetabling, and focus on teaching to the test that is having a detrimental impact on holistic education.

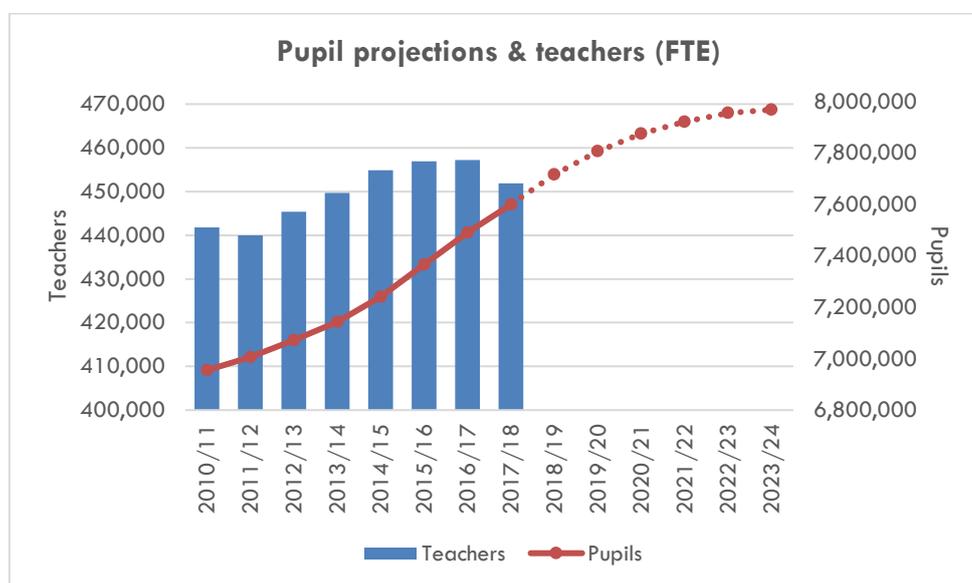
## Target 4.c – Teachers

Target 4.c focusses on teachers, calling on leaders to *substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers*. Here, the evidence of England falling behind is clear. The number of teachers in the state-funded system fell by 1.2% in 2018, despite pupil numbers rising by 1.2%.<sup>xxii</sup> The trend is not likely to improve – the Department for Education has missed its recruitment targets for trainee teachers for the last six years.<sup>xxiii</sup> This has led to what has been described by the joint general secretaries of the NEU as “the recruitment and retention crisis.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The education systems across the UK are devolved. This briefing will look at the English education system specifically, not the whole of the UK.

The crisis has led to increased class sizes and workload for teachers, meaning conditions have worsened. Again, this is unlikely to improve. The ratio across all English state schools of pupils-to-teachers rose from 17.7 in 2012 to 18.7 in 2017.<sup>xxv</sup> As one in every five teachers plans to leave the profession within two years, these factors will only get worse.<sup>xxvi</sup>



SOURCE: School workforce in England: November 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/school-workforce-in-england-november-2017>; and DfE, National pupil projections: July 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/national-pupil-projections-july-2018>

As the attrition rate suggests, teachers are leaving the profession in droves. While this is a product of many different factors, one of the key reasons is pay. A 2018 NEU survey found that “over two-thirds of teachers (70%) have considered quitting the profession because of low pay or concerns about unfairness in pay progression” and “almost four-fifths (79%) of teachers feel that they are underpaid compared to their contemporaries in other graduate professions.”<sup>xxvii</sup> The NEU has identified that “teacher pay across the Main Pay Range would require an increase of some 15 per cent to restore it to 2010 levels in real terms” and “teachers on the Upper Pay Range would require a pay increase of over 17 per cent”.<sup>xxviii</sup> This must be addressed if we are to achieve Target 4.c, and indeed all of SDG4 given how vital teachers are to education as a whole.

### Funding and SDG4

The full realisation of SDG4 for all young people in England relies on a properly funded system. While not outlined specifically in any of the Targets or Indicators for SDG4, a state clearly cannot achieve the aims outlined in the Goal without putting ambitious resources towards it. It is paramount, therefore, that the Government addresses the cuts to education funding as a matter of urgency if they are serious about achieving Agenda 2030. With 91% of primary schools and 94% of secondary schools having their per pupil funding cut, it remains difficult to see how England will be able to *leave no one behind*, especially children with special educational needs and disabilities, black and minority ethnic students, refugees, and pupils in poverty, without tackling these cuts.

## SDG8: Decent Work

As pupils leave school and enter the world of work, it is important that there are opportunities for them to succeed in a respected, supported, and fairly-compensated profession. Rightly, the UK notes that NEET levels (young people *not in education, employment or training*) have been steadily dropping since 2011. It is fair to say that the UK is on-track to achieve Target 8.6 – to *substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training*.

However, Indicator 8.B.1 is more problematic. This indicator calls on governments to assess progress through *total government spending in social protection and employment programmes as a proportion of the national budgets and GDP*. The crisis in post-16 and further education funding indicates that the UK is off-target in this regard. According to the Education Policy Institute, since 2010/11 per-pupil funding for full-time equivalent 16-19-year-old students in further education has fallen in real terms by 18%. At the same time, funding has shrunk by a staggering 26% in school sixth forms.<sup>xxxix</sup> This equates to “around double the rate of cuts seen in all school phases.”<sup>xxxx</sup> This is a crisis that risks undermining employability for the next generation.

Furthermore, the divide between A-levels and B-Tech – that is, academic and vocational studies – continues to grow. Rather than being of equal value, a recent House of Lords report indicated that pupils who choose a non-academic route after school are disadvantaged.<sup>xxxi</sup> Technical education must be further supported and there must be T-level and apprenticeship reforms in order to fully address this divide.

Returning to the premise of *leaving no one behind*, it is vital that development is inclusive of those with additional needs, including people with disabilities. Target 8.5 sets out that states must *achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value*. However, average hourly earnings for those without long-term illness/disability rose 7.2% between Q1 2015 and Q4 2017, while earnings rose only 1.4% for those with long-term illness/disability.<sup>xxxii</sup> Over the same period, RPI inflation rose by 7.8%, meaning that earnings for those with a long-term illness or disability remained near-stagnant, effectively a real-terms pay cut.

Similarly, women in the education profession have experienced a near stagnant, if not growing, gap in remuneration. The gap at the mean level grew between 2015 and 2018, from 12.1% to 12.2%.<sup>xxxiii</sup> While at the median level it did fall slightly during this time (7.8% to 7.6%), this is hardly on track to achieving equal pay.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Instead of moving towards equal pay for equal work for all, the gender and ability divide is growing – undermining the achievement of the SDGs.

Finally, while not a stated aspect of SDG8, it is important to highlight the heavy workload of teachers and the impact this has on their ability to realise decent working conditions. The Department for Education’s 2016 workload survey found that classroom teachers and middle leaders work an average of 54.4 hours during the reference week, and senior leaders working an average of 60.0 hours.<sup>xxxv</sup> This is well above the legal limit for the working week, set by the government at 48 hours. This further leads to the issues of recruitment and retention in the teaching profession, and ultimately the ability to realise SDG4 for all children and young people.

## SDG10: Reduce Inequalities

*Leaving no one behind* in achieving the SDGs means addressing the high-degree of inequality that exists both nationally and internationally. Unfortunately, the UK does not show progress in this area.

While the “Emerging Findings” document suggested that “the five year annualised average income growth rate (for the period ending 2016/17) was 2.5% for the poorest and 1.9% for all households”, the Office of National Statistics (ONS) notes that “Income inequality increased slightly in financial year ending (FYE) 2018 from 31.4% to 32.5%, based on estimates from our Living Costs and Food Survey.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> This continues a pattern of an at best unchanged, at worst deteriorating, GINI coefficient in the UK. The ONS also notes that “New experimental statistics show the richest 1% of the population’s share of total household disposable income was 7.1% in FYE 2018, largely unchanged over the past seven years.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Statistics from the Resolution Foundation paint a similar picture. While during and after the financial crisis the poorest families experienced a smaller drop in disposable income (likely because they had less to lose), it is now the case that, as the economy is recovering, the rich are growing richer. Projected statistics (2016/17-2020/21) calculated by the Resolution Foundation suggest that households in the lowest 10% of disposable income will lose 1.0% of average annual income, whereas the top 1% will see a nearly 0.9% growth in income.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Those who stand to gain are those at the top.

The problem of inequality is clearly seen in the academy model in England. For example, in the Harris Academy Federation, the CEO Daniel Moynihan annual income is 21 times the full-time equivalent of a teaching assistant’s salary.<sup>xxxix</sup>

All of this informs the assertion made in the UK’s 2019 State of the Nation report “that social mobility has stagnated over the last four years at virtually all stages from birth to work.”<sup>xl</sup> The UK is far from being on course to achieve equality and the SDGs.

## SDG16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

SDG16 calls on Governments to *promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*. While the UK is an established democracy with strong institutions, there are still areas of improvement in relation to SDG16 and social justice.

Target 16.B calls on states to *Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development*. The indicator for this target looks at the proportion of the population that has felt personally discriminated or harassed. In the UK, the rise in reported hate crimes would suggest that this is an area where parts of the UK are falling behind.

England and Wales saw an increase of 17% in hate crimes in 2017/18, with nearly 100,000 crimes reported.<sup>xli</sup> This continues the upward trend in recent years, with the number of hate crimes recorded by the police having more than doubled since 2012/13 (up 123%). Though it is suggested that the rise in hate crimes may be at least in part due to stronger reporting mechanisms, spikes following key events (such as the EU Referendum and the 2017 terrorist attacks) suggest that crimes are on the rise in reality, not just in reporting rates.

The teaching profession is not immune from racism and discrimination. A 2017 report from the NEU found that “BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] teachers believed that racism and discrimination was still endemic across primary and secondary schools,” whether or not this was deliberate.<sup>xlii</sup>

## Conclusion

As we enter the decade of delivery for the Sustainable Development Goals (2020-2030), it is vital that the UK re-evaluates its current progress on the Goals and resets its course. As such, we welcome the UK’s Voluntary National Review process in 2019.

As the largest education union in Europe, the NEU feels it is important that the UK provides an honest and open evaluation of progress and the challenges that remain, in relation to education and social justice. This briefing has given a snapshot indicating that the UK is off-track to realising the Goals for all citizens in the UK by 2030. We need to shift the course, and dramatically, if we are to see the world envisioned by leaders in 2030.

To facilitate this change, we recommend that the Government:

- **Addresses**, as a matter of urgency, all forms of poverty in the UK by critically evaluating the implications of Universal Credit (and acting accordingly), responding in full to the UN Special Rapporteur’s recommendations on poverty in the UK, and abandoning the work-centric approach to poverty reduction;
- **Adopts** a proactive approach to child hunger, including holiday hunger, by working with teachers, trade unions, families, NGOs and community groups to develop a plan of action, while continuing to fight childhood obesity;
- **Supports** teachers and trade unions’ demands to improve education, including deliver a more ambitious approach to SDG4.7, reversing all funding cuts to education, delivering a fully-funded 5% pay increase for all teachers, and widening the curriculum to focus on more than just testing;
- **Increases** funding for Further Education as a matter of urgency, and improves conditions for teachers to address the crisis of teacher workload and attrition;
- **Acts** to reverse the worrying trends in inequality and tackle the growing GINI coefficient, while limiting the gaps in income of the highest and lowest earners in education; and
- **Commits** to engaging with individuals and communities affected by hate crime to better support their needs and tackle the issue.

## Further reading

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- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Resolution Foundation, *How has income growth been shared since the 1960s?*, 21 February 2018, available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/data/household-incomes/>.
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- <sup>xl</sup> Social Mobility Commission, *State of the Nation 2018-19: Social Mobility in Great Britain*, April 2019, available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/798404/SMC\\_State\\_of\\_the\\_Nation\\_Report\\_2018-19.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/798404/SMC_State_of_the_Nation_Report_2018-19.pdf)
- <sup>xli</sup> Home Office, *Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2017/18*, 16 October 2018, available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/748598/hate-crime-1718-hosb2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/748598/hate-crime-1718-hosb2018.pdf).
- <sup>xlii</sup> National Education Union, *Barriers report: the impact of racism on BME teachers*, available at: <https://neu.org.uk/barriers-report-impact-racism-bme-teachers>.