

Can teacher students be nudged in the right direction?

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Hundreds of teacher training education applicants fail to turn up for the start of their study programmes. Behavioural economists have experimented on them to check whether some nudging might help.

Last autumn, 554 places on teacher education programmes were left vacant in Norway.

Universities and university colleges want to fill these places, but even more importantly: The country needs new generations of teachers who will remain in the profession.

At present, one third of all new teachers find a different profession after teaching for just a few years.

Giving applicants a nudge

"The fact that applicants for a study programme fail to show up is not a problem that is unique to Norway, and nor does it concern teacher education programmes in particular, but the Ministry of Education and Research wanted to try out different kinds of nudging in the application process in order to increase the number of qualified applicants who actually turn up when the study programmes start," says Professor Kjetil Bjorvatn, head of the research team tasked with nudging potential student teachers.

They looked at last year's applicants for primary and lower secondary teacher education programmes at five Norwegian educational institutions.

Nudging has become an international trend. Giving people a nudge is not about introducing new laws and prohibitions, but is more a case of encouraging people to voluntarily go in a certain direction. The authorities nudge us in a variety of ways – to eat healthier food, to eat smaller portions or to exercise regularly.

Cheap and effective nudging

"The intention is to influence the recipient's behaviour. For example, you can send text messages to all new students to remind them about when study programmes start, and this will hopefully increase the proportion who turn up. We now have quite a lot of research indicating that simple nudges of this kind can be cheap and effective measures," says Bjorvatn.

The question was whether potential student teachers would take the bait.

In the randomised field experiment (see the fact box), they administered "medicine" in the form of three nudges:

1. A quick answer nudge: Information that the applicant would be included in a draw for free syllabus

literature if he or she said yes to the offer of a place on the study programme.

2. An info nudge: Information about teachers' pay and job opportunities, and that teaching is a meaningful profession, as well as a link to an inspirational video.
3. A plan nudge: The applicants were asked to answer whether they planned to accept or reject an offer of a place on the programme.

Considered choices

The results of the NHH researchers' study show that the behaviour of the group that was nudged did not differ from that of the control group. Extra information, reminders or promises of prizes did not help.

"Not all decisions or all types of behaviour can be nudged in the desired direction," Bjorvatn points out.

"We interpret the findings as an indication that the students had made considered choices. It is not because of irrational decisions or chance that so many drop out during the application process," he says.

The fact that they received a lot of information about deadlines and extra messages from the educational institutions had no effect. So, if university colleges and universities want more students to turn up for the start of the semester, other means will have to be used, either financial or by making the aim of the study programme – the teaching profession – more attractive, explains the researcher from NHH's Department of Economics.

Impulsive decisions

"What is your explanation for why hundreds of applicants say 'no'?"

"Many of them are uncertain when they submit their application forms and include the teacher education programme as a back-up. When they discover that they have other possibilities, they say "no" to the teacher education programme. This is something they have planned, and the decisions are a result of this."

Nudging is a method that works well in situations where decisions are made on impulse.

They are situations where people put off making unpleasant decisions or forget about them. But choosing an educational institution is not an impulsive decision. That is an interesting insight, I think. Nudging is the right thing to do in a number of areas, but in a setting involving choices that are clearly important for the decision maker, where a lot of decision support is provided, there is not much room for nudging."

No universal solution

"Nudging is very much in vogue, and many people believe that it is a universal solution," says Bjorvatn.

"But we don't run around like headless chickens. Many decisions are logical and rational. They are choices we "think slow" about, as Daniel Kahneman writes in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*," Bjorvatn says.

The professor is very pleased that the authorities and politicians seem to have really discovered behavioural economics in general, and The Choice Lab at NHH, in particular.

'I find it very interesting that the ministry wants to use behavioural research and knowledge about nudging, and wishes to test it.

Reference:

Kjetil Bjorvatn, Mathias Ekström, Armando J. G. Pires: Små dytt for store valg: Rapport fra et forskningsprosjekt om nudging for økt rekruttering til lærerutdanningen. Samfunnsøkonomen nr. 3 (2017) [In Norwegian]

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Fact box

The study is designed as a randomised field experiment, where the effect of the different types of nudges is tested and compared with a control group.

The sample consists of applicants to the primary and lower secondary teacher education programme for 1st to 7th year pupils and 5th to 10th year pupils, respectively, at five cooperating institutions. The total sample consist of 1,321 applicants. Of the total, 822 were offered places (some of them contingent on passing a maths course).

Of the 822 who were offered a place on the programme, 623, around 75%, started on the programme.

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