

Standing up for teacher education: Why HE is a vital partner in teacher professional formation and development

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How policy is undermining the role of HE

It is important to recognize that the coalition government's starting point is a view of teaching as a 'craft activity' "best learnt as an apprentice" (1) in which, by extension HE has no place. The antipathy to HE's involvement in teacher education is further justified in terms of a negative view of the impact of HE in teacher education. HE is, according to ministers, not just irrelevant to teacher education but damaging. The Schools Minister Nick Gibb, (for example 2), has placed the blame for our education system slipping down the international rankings on academics in the education faculties of universities and has argued that "It is challenging the hegemony of the education departments of the universities that must be the focus of any serious education reformer".

This flies in the face of international and national opinion. In 2011, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) concluded that the most successful school systems in the world have forms of teacher education that place a strong emphasis on practice in schools but also have a strong commitment to university-based provision, a view shared by the House of Commons Select Committee on Education in its 2012 report *Great Teachers: Attracting, training and retaining the best* (3). Yet in England, recent policy is working to undermine the role of HE in teacher education and the government attitude seems to place any form of school based experience as automatically superior to university based provision.

Three national institutions concerned with teacher education and the role of universities have recently produced documents which consider the impact and implications of this policy context for universities, teacher education and education research, the Higher Education Academy (2013) (4), the British Education Research Association with the Royals Society of Arts (BERA/RSA, 2014), (5) and Universities UK (2014) (6). These three documents give a comprehensive and consistent overview of the results and dangers of current policy and we summarise the key points here.

In policy terms the current government's prejudice has been translated into initiatives such as the removal of the requirement for teachers in academies and free schools to have QTS, centralised modes of accountability that promote a culture of compliance and a narrowly technicist approach to the education of teachers and the growth of alternative routes into teaching. In the Schools' Direct Programme for example, schools recruit pre-service teachers with view to subsequent employment and commission 'training providers' (still mostly universities) to manage their training.

This growth of alternative routes has been at the cost of the systematic cutting back of teacher education places in HEIs resulting in a 23% drop in teacher training places allocated to universities between the 2012-

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13 and 2015-16 academic years. Some universities, including the University of Bath and the Open University, have pulled out of postgraduate teacher training already, followed most recently by Anglia Ruskin University (7).

The result is a fragmentation and proliferation of training routes of increased variability. The recent Ofsted annual report (8) for example has highlighted some concerns about the quality of training in Schools Direct, and the need for effective quality assurance arrangements so that trainees receive a consistently high standard of training.

In the current context of austerity there is also the danger that schools and aspiring teachers may increasingly opt for cheaper QTS only route breaking the increasingly tenuous link between HE study and professional qualification.

And it is not just the role of HE in initial teaching education which is undermined. As individual teachers and schools experience increasing financial pressures their capacity to pay for CPD both through accredited post-qualifying programmes and through provision offered to individual and groups of schools on a consultancy basis is reduced.

Education research and teacher education

While the provision of teacher education has been undermined so has the capacity of Education Departments in universities to carry out education research. As Furlong argues “[...] only one third of Education academics were entered for the last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and only 23% of Education academics currently have a doctorate as their highest qualification” (4).

Research on teacher educators and education academics shows that this group has been characterized by heavier workloads, longer teaching years and less research engagement than other academic groups. It is also the case that whilst the number of academic staff in HEIs has increased in most subjects, Education has seen a 7% decline between 2004/5 and 2012/13 (9) and an increased casualisation. At 34%, Education has the highest proportion of teaching-only staff of any social science, many of them on casualised contracts (9).

Additionally, over recent years ESRC funding for educational research projects has been declining whilst it has been growing in other social sciences. Project funding for educational research has also been cut as have opportunities for consultancy activities.

Why this matters

There are practical as well as more fundamental philosophical reasons why this matters. At a practical level institutions have a reduced ability to plan strategically in the long term as annual allocations leave a relatively short amount of time for institutions to plan future ITT provision and this lack of stability threatens consistency of teacher supply (6).

This lack of coordinated strategic planning is also reflected in the concern expressed by Ofsted that “good and outstanding schools with the opportunity to cherry pick the best trainees may further exacerbate the stark

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differences in local and regional performance [and the] nation must avoid a polarised education system where good schools get better at the expense of weaker schools” (8).

There is also the consequent loss of expertise, and reduced capacity of the system to respond to need. As an example, Drama courses have suffered severe cuts in allocations over the past few years and universities have closed courses in Drama. In some cases where courses were closed due to cuts in allocations and the staff made redundant, the university was given an allocation the following year, but no longer had the expertise to provide the courses (10).

In the past, when the School Direct programme has failed to recruit sufficient numbers, universities have stepped in (11) to take on extra trainees to avoid a teacher shortage. Universities UK report that in 2013-14, School Direct filled only two-thirds of its allocated places, while universities and other PGCE providers filled 90% of theirs. The UUK (2014) report also warns of issues around teacher shortages in some subjects – particularly as School Direct has faced more challenges in recruiting teachers for science, engineering, maths and technology (STEM) subjects. If universities respond to the unpredictable nature of ITT funding by withdrawing from teacher education this could have major implications for all the training routes they support including Schools Direct.

But it also matters in terms of the fundamental purpose of teacher education and education research. The BERA/RSA Inquiry presents domestic and international evidence which confirms that: “Internationally, enquiry-based (or ‘research-rich’) school and college environments are the hallmark of high performing education systems” (BERA/RSA 2014:8). Universities have a distinctive contribution to make to achieving this and schools in the current context are ill positioned to manage this on their own.

HEIs are well placed to enable teachers and teacher educators to engage *with* research and enquiry (through keeping up to date with developments in their subject and the discipline of education) as well as equipping them to “engage *in* enquiry oriented practice so that disciplined innovation and collaborative enquiry become the normal way of teaching and learning” (BERA/RSA 2014: 8)

As Furlong argues (HEA, 2013) it is universities’ commitment to what we might call ‘the contestability of knowledge’ or to the ‘maximisation of reason’ in society which is vital to facing the challenges of educating the next generation. We need the involvement of HEIs in teacher education to give access to disciplinary knowledge and participation in scholarly communities from which teachers can develop a strong intellectual grounding to challenge assumptions and develop their own informed, independent views on alternatives so that professional knowledge empowers them to contribute to enhancing pedagogy. HEIs also have an important role in providing a perspective independent of, and broader than, that of an individual school. Many commentators mention the importance of ‘distance’ in both space and time which university study can afford enabling a more critically reflective perspective on practice.

An alternative vision

Much of what informs current policy in terms of the role of universities in education research and teacher education is based on two false dichotomies ; the separation of research from practice on the one hand and of

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HE and school based approaches to teacher education on the other. The former suggest Education research can be developed in the university and the results given to teachers who are cast as “rule following operatives” or “executive technicians” (to implement. But this is a limited and reductive understanding of ‘research informed teaching and teacher education’ which, it has been argued would be better understood as ‘scholarship informed teaching and teacher education’ which casts the teacher instead as ‘citizen scholar’ ie who can integrate subject and education disciplinary knowledge into their practice “both as classroom teachers and as citizens contributing to wider public debates about educational purposes, systems and practices” (Gerwitz in HEA, 2013: 11). Equally importantly, this vision casts teachers as active researchers contributing to a research-rich self-improving education system by sharing “a common responsibility for the continuous development of their research literacy [which is] written into initial and continuing education programmes” and engaging “in research and enquiry, collaborating colleagues in other schools and colleges and with members of the wider research community based in universities and elsewhere” (BERA/RSA 2014:7). The separation of HE and school-based approaches is also a false dichotomy. An interdependent partnership has been a feature of the successful relationship between HE and schools recognizing the distinctive and valuable contribution each can make – what is at issue is the very basis of such partnerships when the contribution HE can make is systematically undermined.

In a recent press release (12) announcing plans for a new independent college of teaching and improved professional development, Schools Minister David Laws is quoted as saying; “Teachers are the single most important resource in our schools. Teaching should and must be on an equal footing with other high-status professions like law and medicine”. Perhaps the Carter Review (13) which will soon be reporting on its review of initial teacher education will have had a chance to reflect on the crucial role of HE in those professions.

- 1) www.gov.uk/government/speeches/michael-gove-to-the-national-college-annual-conference-birmingham
- 2) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/23/teaching-unions-arent-problem-universities-schools-minister>
- 3) <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmeduc/1515/151502.htm>
- 4) <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/learning-teach-exploring-history-and-role-higher-education-teacher-education>
- 5) www.bera.ac.uk/project/research-and-teacher-education
- 6) <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/highereducation/Pages/ImpactOfITTreforms.aspx#.VNymWLCsX8V>
- 7) <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/future-of-teacher-training-under-threat/2016503.article>
- 8) www.gov.uk/government/collections/ofsted-annual-report-201314
- 9) www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/shifting_academic_careers_FINAL.pdf
- 10) <http://www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/2014/11/no-rhyme-or-reason-in-the-allocation-of-teacher-training-places/>
- 11) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-25104936>
- 12) <http://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-measures-to-support-a-world-class-teaching-profession>
- 13) <http://www.gov.uk/government/news/independent-review-of-initial-teacher-training-courses-launched>