Learning to teach

Part 1: Exploring the history and role of higher education in teacher education

Edited by Lani Florian and Nataša Pantić, University of Edinburgh
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Preface

The question of how to improve Initial Teacher Education is one that is being addressed by all four nations of the United Kingdom. In each, fundamental questions have been asked about the most effective means to support the development of teachers and the institutional arrangements that will best support this. The conclusions that have been reached are not identical and different approaches to developing excellence are being developed in each nation.

The Higher Education Academy works with higher education providers from across the UK and internationally to support the development of teaching and learning. In this two part publication we present a number of the papers that were delivered at our Social Science Teaching and Learning Summit in January 2013. The focus of this event was initial teacher education and we aimed to bring together a range of voices from across the sector to examine-currents developments and explore the scope for more effective practice moving forward. The learning from the summit has informed the scoping of our support for teacher education and the work that we will undertake in this area during coming year.

Learning to teach is a two part publication edited by Lani Florian and Nataša Pantić.

Part One of this presents the analysis and views of a number of prominent academics on current developments in the policy context of initial teacher education. The Higher Education Academy adopts a neutral position on these policy developments and presents the analysis and views expressed here to stimulate and contribute to discussion on the role of higher education providers in teacher education.

Part Two of the publication focuses on practice and includes three case studies of scholarly informed teacher education from England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. They provide important examples of effective and developing practice in different settings that will support further enhancement.

Developing excellent teachers is essential to developing excellent education. As the Secretary of State for Education, The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP stated, in his speech to the National College annual conference in June 2012, “no education system can outperform its teachers and the most successful jurisdictions, though they may differ hugely in other aspects, share a focus on recruiting the very best graduates and training them in outstanding institutions”. Supporting the contribution that can be made to achieving this by higher education providers is the focus of our work.

Dr John Craig
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I. Introduction

Teacher education is undergoing a period of rapid change and there is concern across all four countries of the UK that a potential diminution of the role of research-informed teaching in teacher education programmes could impact on the student experience and the quality of the teaching workforce.

As part of the new services being developed by the Higher Education Academy to support strategic development within disciplines, a Social Sciences Teaching and Learning Summit was held in January 2013, at Kents Hill Hotel and Conference Centre, Milton Keynes. This event brought together an expert audience of teacher educators from 35 higher education providers, schools and organisations involved in teacher education from across the four nations to discuss research-informed teacher education and the role of universities in teacher education. A State of the Nations panel was followed by presentations focusing on examples of innovative strategies and practice aimed at maintaining research-informed teacher education. Papers presented at the summit form the basis of this publication and the outcomes of the summit inform the strategic direction for HEA-sponsored projects on teacher education for 2013/14.

This part of the publication comprises of the four papers that were presented by the State of the Nations panel, the focus of the summit. John Furlong discusses teacher education as part of ‘the university project’. Sharon Gewirtz argues the need for developing teachers as scholar-citizens. Olwen McNamara and Jean Murray discuss the implications of the School Direct programme for research-informed teacher education and teacher educators. Geoff Whitty discusses teacher education and research in higher education institutions in England.

Part 2 of the publication explores the distinctive contribution of university-based teacher education and can be downloaded from http://bit.ly/1d4Pj7I. In that section, key themes identified during the HEA summit on university-based teacher education are discussed within the parameters set by the State of the Nations papers. It synthesises the key points and comments on the themes identified at the summit, drawing on relevant international literature. The commentary discusses three areas of higher education’s distinctive contribution to teacher education, including research and scholarly engagement, professional reflection, and preparation for inclusion and diversity. It also serves to introduce three case studies, which illustrate some of the work currently underway at higher education institutions in the UK in each of these areas.

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2. The discipline of Education: Rescuing the ‘university project’

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Education is Britain’s second-largest social science; only Business and Administration is larger. But as a discipline, it is at a major turning point, a crisis even. Some readers might find the use of the term ‘discipline’ provocative; it is intended to be. This is because disciplines are not merely intellectually coherent fields of study; they also have a political life. They are argued for, supported, challenged and debated. Nowhere is this truer than in Education and particularly in England where the role of university-based knowledge within professional education continues to be fiercely debated. Epistemologically, Education may lack the consensus and coherence of some of the more established disciplines; nevertheless institutionally and politically it functions very much as a discipline in its own right, even though, for most of its existence, it has not been ‘master’ of its own destiny. This political weakness has come about largely because, as a discipline, Education has always been dominated by its involvement with teacher education. Whilst research, the teaching of higher degrees and, increasingly, ‘non-professional’ undergraduate degrees are vitally important parts of faculties today, the field as a whole has been profoundly shaped by its engagement with professional preparation. Initial teacher education still accounts for 66% of student numbers in the field (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] 2011). At least, that was the case until 2012. In England things were about to change.

In June 2012 the Secretary of State for Education announced that within the lifetime of this government, well over half of all teacher training places in England will be delivered in through schools. A new School Direct scheme will see much of the funding going to schools, which will be free to ‘purchase’ those services they need from a university of their choice or from another accredited provider. If the scheme becomes fully established, and the Secretary of State seems determined that it should, it will mean that in the future, only a minority of initial teacher education in England will be provided through our university system.

The challenge to the contribution of our universities to the field of Education is not new. For over 25 years, so-called ‘alternative routes’ into teaching (TeachFirst and the Graduate Teacher Programme) have been slowly gaining ground. Universities have also been progressively squeezed out of in-service education in England. Up until the 1990s, they were major providers of award- and non-award bearing courses for teachers; today the vast majority of in-service funding goes directly to schools with most of their training provided internally. Under the current Coalition as under New Labour, Government contracts for major Education research projects are just as easily let to private consortia and consultancy companies as to research-led universities. From every quarter it seems that the contribution of our universities to the field of Education in England has been questioned, as is the assumption that they have something essential, something distinctive to contribute.

This is not the case in other countries. A few states in the US have pursued an even more aggressive move towards ‘alternative routes’ into teaching than England, but the overwhelming majority of countries are not following this approach. In an important 2011 report to the US Government on the implications of its most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) makes it clear that the most successful school systems in the world – Finland, Singapore and Shanghai – have forms of teacher education that place strong emphasis on the practicalities of teaching in schools but also retain a commitment to university-based provision. Prospective teachers have the opportunity to study how young people learn and to engage with the findings of the latest pedagogical research; they can develop as researchers themselves with well-supported opportunities to undertake Masters and doctorates (OECD 2011).
In other parts of the UK the position of universities also remains strong. In Scotland in 2011 the Donaldson Report (Donaldson 2011) reaffirmed the centrality of the universities' contribution, while Wales is currently launching a new Masters degree for all newly qualified teachers. And in the Republic of Ireland, postgraduate training is moving from one to two years, undergraduate degrees are being lengthened and in the future all courses are to be provided by research-led university departments of Education rather than freestanding teachers’ colleges (Sahlberg et al. 2012). Only England and a few southern-belt states in the US seem determined to ignore the potential contribution of our universities to the field of education.

How has it come to this? The truth is that Education in our universities, particularly in England and Wales, has never been that secure. Their doors were first opened to teachers in the 1890s with the establishment of day training colleges. Within a generation, these institutions had become university departments of Education: they appointed professors and became home to the first educational research. But this was always the minority system, mainly preparing teachers for fee-paying secondary schools. The much larger system of religious and (after 1902) local authority colleges, which focused on preparing the ‘teachers of the masses’, was always a separate and largely inferior system – in terms of its resources and educational vision for its students. Vice chancellors of the day were keen to keep such institutions at arm’s length, fearing that any alliance would undermine not only their commitment to loftier forms of knowledge, but also their independence from Government. It was not until 1963 when the Robbins Report (Robbins 1963) recommended that teaching should become a graduate profession that the two systems began to merge, but even then it took another 30 years for the majority of colleges to become fully part of the university world. Today all but a handful of small religious colleges are now fully part of the university system.

Education’s journey to becoming a university discipline was a long one, taking almost 100 years to complete, but in the end it was a pyrrhic victory. By the time education finally ‘arrived’ at the high table, universities themselves had utterly changed. As a consequence of the massification of higher education and the significant reduction in university funding, departments and faculties of Education, like many other disciplines, have increasingly found it essential to become highly market sensitive and entrepreneurial in order to survive. They have had to become particularly adept at responding quickly to the ever more prescriptive demands of their main paymaster – the Government. Added to this, the late-twentieth-century ‘collapse of certainty’ that came about as a consequence of the postmodernist critique was particularly undermining in a professional field like education. If educational research could no longer claim to provide any certainties of knowledge then how could universities claim to be providers of ‘better’ education and training than anyone else? They might be more efficient, they might be cheaper but the collapse of confidence in ‘educational science’ meant that it was much harder to argue that universities had something distinctive to contribute to the study of Education.

In some ways this progressive undermining of the position of Education is no different from that experienced across the university system. As the American historian of higher education Sheldon Rothblatt pointed out (1997), the root of the ‘discontents’ of the modern university is that there is no longer a coherent idea or set of ideas as to what a university actually is; no one seems able to speak for them.

If Education is therefore now fully integrated into our universities it urgently needs to find a voice; to set out a vision for itself; to state what its purpose should be in the modern world. This world is different from the past: it is not the nineteenth-century world of Newman where the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake was enough; nor
the world of the 1960s, with its confidence in the ‘disciplines of education’; nor the world of New Labour with their search for ‘what works’ – evidence-based policies that could be ‘rolled out’ across the country as a whole. It is a world where universities are increasingly only one of many authoritative ‘voices’ craving attention in society; where sophisticated organisations are run by highly educated workforces and new technologies are combining increasingly to ‘decentre’ the university, encouraging new forms of knowledge production and participation; it is a world where the social problems we face are increasingly complex, increasingly interconnected. If the discipline of Education is to find a voice then this is the world in which it has to work.

Given this context, what is it that universities may contribute to the study of Education? In order to answer that question we first need to ask what universities themselves are for. What makes them distinctive? The answer is that even in a world of uncertainty they do retain one vitally important principle that marks them out from any other institution in contemporary society and that is their commitment to what we might call ‘the contestability of knowledge’ or to the ‘maximisation of reason’ in society. Our confidence in the ‘truth’ of our knowledge may have been tempered by the epistemological challenges of the late twentieth century. Whether or not we fully accept the postmodern critique, we know that any ‘truths’ that research and scholarship can reveal in education are always partial and only temporary – in the end they atrophy. As David Berliner so eloquently argued several years ago, Education is the ‘hardest science of all’ (Berliner 2002). But what does not change is our commitment to the process of the pursuit of truth. Generating and assessing evidence, challenging and contesting assumptions, these are processes that go to the heart of our teaching and research. While these activities are much more broadly undertaken in society than before, it is only in universities where ‘the contestability of knowledge’ is at the very heart of what the institution is about. In short it is their commitment to the ‘contestability of knowledge’ that marks universities out as unique in society; and it is this commitment that goes to the very heart of what the university-based study of Education can contribute.

In recent years, a number of commentators – most notably Nussbaum (2010) and Collini (2012) – have argued that the humanities need singling out for protection in the modern university. The humanities, they argue, are so central to the preservation of debate and reason in our democracies that they must be protected from the ravages of a marketised system of higher education where everything is judged only in utilitarian terms. The humanities may well need protecting but educationalists need to win the argument that those studying Education also need the opportunity to engage with evidence, to challenge underlying assumptions, to debate ends as well as means. This is what the university-based study of Education offers. Surely if anyone in our society needs the opportunity to engage in these sorts of activity, it is those such as teachers and lecturers who are educating our next generation. And the challenges of educating the next generation are formidable. The rapid changes in technology, the explosion of knowledge, the major changes in society with ever-growing mobility, diversity and potential conflict – all these factors mean that more than ever before we need to educate young people to think critically about knowledge and values, to recognise differences in interpretation, to develop the skills needed to form their own judgements. If we are to meet these sorts of educational challenge then it is essential that the professionals who work with young people have access to a personal and professional education that is ‘critical’, that gives them the skills and dispositions needed to deal effectively with the uncertainties of the modern world. This is what sustained engagement with universities and ‘the contestability of knowledge’ can bring.
But if Education is to win the argument that universities have something essential, something distinctive to contribute to professional education then it too will need to change. Too often in the past, educationalists have been content to sit in their university ivory towers, ‘disseminating truths’. Educationalists urgently need to develop collaborative partnerships with teachers, schools and others; partnerships that are institutionalised and based on the genuine recognition that however important the university’s contribution, it is always only part of the story. Professionals in schools and colleges have a critical role to play in professional education too.

“It is their commitment to the ‘contestability of knowledge’ that marks universities out as unique in society; and it is this commitment that goes to the very heart of what the university-based study of Education can contribute.”

Furlong

If Education is to find a voice in this rapidly changing world then it also needs to become much more effective in terms of ‘knowledge mobilisation’. For a discipline that prides itself on being relevant, being applied, far too much of its research remains largely irrelevant to the world of educational policy or practice. That means putting far more effort than before into working collaboratively in the development of research; working more effectively with ‘knowledge brokers’ such think tanks; it even means thinking about the development of new institutional structures where the boundaries between schools, colleges, industry and universities are less sharply drawn. Only if educationalists can demonstrate the value of their work more effectively than in the past can they expect to continue to find public support.

Finally, if they are to win the argument that they have something distinctive to offer, faculties and departments of Education need to take research far more seriously than in the past. Although Education is one of the largest social sciences in Britain, it is salutary to note that 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 (HESA 2012). At the same time we know that Education has the highest proportion of teaching-only staff in any social science, around 34%, many of them on casualised contracts (HESA 2012). While there may be sound economic reasons for these uncomfortable facts, what university managers have to recognise is that every time core university teaching is undertaken by staff who are not supported in research, not part of the scholarly culture that maintains commitment to ‘the contestability of knowledge’, it fundamentally undermines the universities’ claim that they have something essentially distinctive to contribute.

Forty years ago, Robert Pirsig observed that the idea of a university was hard to pin down; it could not be defined in terms of buildings or courses. Instead, he argued, ‘The real university is a state of mind … it is nothing less than the continuing body of reason itself’ (Pirsig 1974: 65). Those in education have as much right and perhaps more need than many in society to develop that state of mind. Educationalists therefore need to stand up and be counted and help to rescue education’s university project before it is too late.

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HESA (2011) Students by subject of study, first year indicator, mode of study and level of study 2009/10 [online]. Available from: http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1897/706/ [11 October 2012].


3. Developing teachers as scholar-citizens, reasserting the value of university involvement in teacher education

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While other countries, including those whose schools are regarded as internationally successful, see university involvement in teacher education as a sine qua non of quality teacher education,¹ the Coalition government is taking England in the opposite direction. In keeping with wider shifts in education and welfare provision, teacher education is being transformed into a more fully marketised ‘demand-led’ system within which responsibility for the recruitment and training of student teachers is increasingly being placed in the hands of schools, federations of schools and academy chains. The direction of policy is not new; rather what we are seeing is a rapid intensification of trends set in train by previous governments. The picture that is emerging, as highlighted by the contributors to the January 2013 Higher Education Academy (HEA) summit on teacher education, is one of fragmentation, with a proliferation of training routes and a marked reduction in university-led provision. At the same time, despite the Coalition’s promise to liberate education from ‘the constraints of central Government direction’,² schools and university departments of education continue to be subject to centralised modes of accountability that risk producing a culture of compliance and a narrowly technicist approach to the education of teachers. In this paper I will briefly sketch out some of the key features of this new landscape, explain why the diminished role for universities in the education of teachers and the concomitant ‘technicisation’ of teaching and teacher education should be a matter of concern, and make some suggestions about the arguments that could and should be marshalled to defend the central importance of universities in teacher education.

3.1 The new landscape of teacher education

Although, as Geoff Whitty has suggested, a small core of traditional ‘full-service’ higher education institute–school partnerships may well survive in the new world of teacher education, these will be eclipsed, at least in terms of numbers trained, by a wide range of autonomous school providers and a series of ‘branded’ routes into teaching associated with Academy chains, Teach First and some universities.³ Within some of these routes, the opportunity for student teachers to spend time in universities, immersed even for short periods in a culture of research and scholarship, will be limited as the emphasis is increasingly placed on schools ‘growing their own’ teachers.⁴ And,

1. For example, in Finland teachers are encouraged to be active researchers, in Ireland both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees for teachers have been lengthened in recent years and in Scotland, where teachers are constructed as public intellectuals expected to ‘engage with fundamental questions concerning the aims and values of education and its relationship to society’ (GTCS, Standard for Initial Teacher Education, 2006), the Donaldson Review has led to an enhanced role for universities in teacher education (see John Furlong, The discipline of Education: rescuing the university ‘project’, this volume).
4. An additional danger associated with the ‘branded’ routes, as my colleague, Simon Gibbons, has pointed out, is that they risk producing teachers who are only equipped to teach in the particular chain within which they have been trained; and, with the deregulation of the
with the removal of the requirement for teachers in academies and free schools to have Qualified Teacher Status, some teachers will be entering the profession without having benefited from any teacher education or training.

Many schools, perhaps the majority, still recognise the special contribution that universities can make to the education of teachers, and are keen to continue working in partnership with them along more traditional lines, whether in the form of the traditional PGCE or in the form of more bespoke models negotiated between schools and universities within the remit of the new School Direct route. However, the capacity of universities to deliver the sort of high-quality teacher education that is being offered in other countries is being put at risk by a student allocation system which is making it difficult for universities to predict with any certainty how many students they will be training each year. The result is likely to be an accelerated casualisation of the teacher education workforce and a concomitant reduction in opportunities for teacher educators to engage in research and scholarship. Moreover, with funding for initial teacher education flowing from universities to schools, and a reduction in the amount of research income going into many education departments as a result of increased selectivity in the distribution of core research funding, it is possible that those university departments of Education which are not forced to close altogether will have to downsize, leading to an intensification of work for the staff who remain. And, as noted by Whitty, the problem of reduced funding for university departments of Education is only likely to be exacerbated by a growing reluctance on the part of teachers to pay for continuing professional development in the form of Master’s degrees when they are having to spend more of their (frozen) pay packets on their pensions while still paying off their undergraduate debts.

In tandem with marketisation, the Coalition government has introduced new standards for teachers which reinforce the technical–rational approach to teacher education encouraged by previous governments. Much like the competencies these standards have replaced, they reduce teaching to a shopping list of behaviours (e.g. ‘setting high expectations’, ‘promoting good progress and outcomes’, ‘demonstrating good subject knowledge’ and ‘planning and teaching well-structured lessons’) to which teachers are expected to conform. These new standards are accompanied by a wider discourse of research-informed teaching in which teachers are cast as rule-following operatives or ‘executive technicians’ who are expected to directly apply ‘proven’ techniques derived from research to enhance their practice. These trends, as Furlong amongst others argues, are at odds with conceptions of teaching and teacher education characteristic of other national contexts (like Scotland, Ireland and Finland). In these contexts teacher education is geared towards producing teachers who view themselves as what might be termed ‘citizen-scholars’. In other words, it is geared towards the production of teachers who are imaginative and independent thinkers, who have a broad cognitive perspective, who are literate in the foundation disciplines (economics, history, philosophy, psychology and sociology), who are knowledgeable about theory, and who are able to integrate this knowledge into their own practice both as classroom teachers and as citizens contributing to wider public debates about educational purposes, systems and practices.

3.2 The importance of university involvement in teacher education

If, as the contributors to the HEA summit suggest, both the quantity and quality of university-based teacher education is under threat in England as a result of the combination of the marketising and technicising tendencies summarised above, then this should undoubtedly be an issue of serious concern. Of course, if we want teachers to be like factory operatives – simply following instructions, delivering a curriculum that has been designed elsewhere – reinforced by a rising discourse of research-informed teaching in which teachers are cast as rule-following operatives or ‘executive technicians’ who are expected to directly apply ‘proven’ techniques derived from research to enhance their practice. These trends, as Furlong amongst others argues, are at odds with conceptions of teaching and teacher education characteristic of other national contexts (like Scotland, Ireland and Finland). In these contexts teacher education is geared towards producing teachers who view themselves as what might be termed ‘citizen-scholars’. In other words, it is geared towards the production of teachers who are imaginative and independent thinkers, who have a broad cognitive perspective, who are literate in the foundation disciplines (economics, history, philosophy, psychology and sociology), who are knowledgeable about theory, and who are able to integrate this knowledge into their own practice both as classroom teachers and as citizens contributing to wider public debates about educational purposes, systems and practices.

...
professionals and intellectuals with the capacity to make, and act upon, their own independent judgments and contribute to thinking about, for example, the role of schools in society, the nature of the curriculum, and appropriate forms of pedagogy, assessment and organisation, then substantial university involvement is the clear answer.

It seems to me that there are two main overlapping reasons for coming to this conclusion. First, university participation in teacher education gives access to disciplinary knowledge and to participation in the scholarly communities where that knowledge is being produced and debated. The importance for teachers (pre- and post-qualification) of being able to engage with scholarly literature and debates in a serious and sustained way, and to learn from university lecturers who are steeped in, and practised at, navigating their way through these debates, cannot be underestimated. Whilst at university, teachers are able to privilege the questioning of taken-for-granted ways of doing things and develop their own independent views on alternatives based on the theoretical perspectives and systematic ways of thinking that a strong grounding in the disciplines provides. For example, such a grounding can help to illuminate the debates and contests surrounding key concepts like curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, attainment, and equality and the consequences, and strengths and weaknesses, of conceptualising these things in different ways. It can enable students to ask and answer fundamental questions, for example, about whether schooling should be compulsory, what role the state should play in the provision of education, what it means to be educated, and how schools contribute to, and how they might disrupt, the reproduction of social inequalities. Such questions will not all have an immediate obvious relevance to teachers’ work in schools but they are important. For example, if teachers find themselves having to teach young people who do not want to be at school or having to teach them in traditional or narrow ways that are not conducive to meaningful learning (because of the way some schooling is currently organised and controlled), the understanding of why these things can be problematic will help teachers to offer an education that is as meaningful as possible within the constraints with which they have to work. This kind of understanding can also help them to contribute to policy discussions about such matters both within and beyond their schools.

Second, universities are important in the provision of teacher education because they give students and teachers space and time for exploration and critical thinking away from the fray. That is, they provide both time away from the daily grind of working in a school and a space where there is permission to ask difficult questions and to challenge the norms and values that dominate in schools. In schools it is often difficult, both politically and interpersonally, to question taken-for-granted norms. Universities, on the other hand, can provide a supportive and facilitative space where thinking differently and creatively is not only allowed, but also positively encouraged, and where students can also benefit from talking to peers who have been placed in different schools and who are likely, therefore, to have been exposed to different school practices and approaches to teaching. Without this space, teachers are far more likely to just reproduce what they already know and replicate existing school practices.  

I do not mean here to conjure up either an idealised image of universities or a deficit model of schools. Schools can also, of course, be places where critical thinking takes place, while universities could do more to dispel the ivory towers image with which they are often associated. The point is rather that there needs to be a partnership and cross-fertilisation between the two settings based on an understanding of the distinct contributions each can make to the education of teachers; and, as Furlong notes, the commitment to question, debate and interrogate principles and evidence is at the centre of what universities do. This, therefore, makes them especially well equipped to develop this commitment, and the capacity to deliver on it, in teachers.

While there is a great deal of talk about ‘research-informed’ teaching and teacher education, and indeed this was the focus of the HEA summit out of which this paper emerged, it follows from the arguments presented here that it may be more useful to think in terms of scholarship-informed teaching and teacher education. The danger of talking about research-informed teaching or teacher education is that it risks reinforcing a narrow ‘engineering’ model of teaching – where teachers are supposed to learn what researchers tell us works and then implement this

11 Indeed the importance of the space universities provide for critical reflection alongside the opportunity they give students to be taught by active researchers has been recognised by Ofsted which, for example, noted in its 2010/11 annual report that: ‘The ability of trainees to reflect critically on their practice is a significant factor in promoting their progress, particularly in HE-led partnerships where staff use their own research activity to promote critical thinking and link the development of subject knowledge with underpinning theory of how children learn’ (Ofsted, The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2010/11, HC 1633, 76). (It is perhaps also worth pointing out here that the same report noted that proportionately more outstanding teacher training occurs in HEI-led partnerships, although more recent Ofsted pronouncements have sought to tell a different story; see, for example, Ofsted’s press release on initial teacher training, 22 March 2013).

12 Furlong op cit.
in the classroom. Instead what is needed are teachers who have the analytic skills, the deep knowledge of scholarly debates and the scholarly disposition not only to be able to read empirical research critically and reflect on its relevance to practice, but also to be comfortable with theory – to be able to think for themselves in disciplined ways, question taken-for-granted ways of doing things, contribute to wider debates about the role of schooling in society and the best way of delivering it and, ideally, be able to undertake their own research and scholarship.\(^{13}\)

Although universities are already compromised in terms of how much of this they can deliver,\(^{14}\) the postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) still provides a gateway to these things, particularly via its link with Master’s degrees. In other words the door hasn’t been slammed yet, and I would suggest, we have an important role to play in keeping it open. We can do this at least in part by reasserting the distinctive role that universities can play in the delivery of teacher education and the importance of training teachers to be ‘scholar-citizens’ rather than executive technicians. If universities are to be properly equipped to deliver on this distinctive role, then the acceleration of non-university school-based teacher education, the underfunding of university departments of Education, and the casualisation of the teacher education workforce are developments in need of reversal.

Such a reversal is crucial if teachers are going to receive the quality of education they need and deserve. Finally, it is worth making the perhaps obvious point that the teachers we are training today are responsible for the education of the undergraduates universities will be admitting tomorrow. If we want undergraduates who are properly prepared for university, they need to have been taught in schools by teachers who are, and deserve to be, treated as scholars and not factory operatives.

\(^{13}\) These can all be seen as essential components of what Whitty has called the ‘professional literacy’ of teachers (Geoff Whitty (2006) Education(al) research and education policy making: Is conflict inevitable? British Educational Research Journal. 32 (2), 162.

\(^{14}\) Because the length of programmes does not allow sufficient time for students to acquire the combination of practical skills and disciplinary knowledge that is needed, because of the narrow technical–rational approach of the standards against which they are inspected and because of the already reduced opportunities for teacher educators to engage in research and scholarly activity fuelled by the funding reductions and casualisation trends set in train by the policies of previous governments.
4. The School Direct programme and its implications for research-informed teacher education and teacher educators

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In the 2010 Schools White Paper, the incoming Secretary of State for Education, set the education system on a trajectory of radical and essentially irreversible reform (DfE 2010). The initial policy initiatives were two-fold. First, there was a rapid expansion of the academies programme, which by September 2012 encompassed over 50% of English secondary schools, bringing with it deregulation of the curriculum and teacher certification, and a freeing of the school governance system from local control and accountability. Second, there was a radical change in teacher training, the political aspiration being to shift control away from universities and into schools (DfE 2010). Both these reforms have profound implications for the future of teacher education, but in this paper we focus on the School Direct programme, that is, the central vehicle for the delivery of the Government’s ambitious proposals for the reform of teacher training in England. Our particular concern here is the implications it will have for the universities involved in providing models of research-informed teacher training and for higher education (HE)-based teacher educators. We also fear that School Direct will have serious implications for the supply of teachers and quality of training, but restrictions of space mean that we can only touch on this issue here (for an expanded analysis, see McNamara et al., in press).

The School Direct programme is a large-scale experiment and represents a sharp step change in the pace of ‘reform’ of teacher training in England. It is a demand-led model in which schools recruit pre-service teachers, with a view to subsequent employment, and the commissioning of universities (or other training providers) to manage and accredit their training. In order to create capacity for the growth of School Direct, the normal or core allocation of training places in universities has been cut back, as we detail later in this article. Despite sustained protests from universities and other stakeholders, all indications are that the Government’s aspiration is for School Direct to become the main – if not only – route into teaching over the next two years.

Since 1984, successive governments of all political persuasions have legislated to make teacher training more ‘relevant’ to practice in schools and more focused on the ‘practical’ knowledge of teaching. But Gove’s reforms, and specifically the introduction of the School Direct programme to provide the architecture, are radical in that they combine three elements: an ideologically driven understanding of teaching as essentially only a ‘craft’ rather than a complex and fundamentally intellectual activity; an apprenticeship model of teacher training that can be located entirely in the workplace; and the related and highly questionable assumption that a longer period of time spent in schools inevitably – and unproblematically – leads to better and ‘more relevant’ student learning. Overall, this is an adaptive model of learning (Ellström 2001) which involves the student teacher in observing and gradually replicating the behaviours of an experienced teacher (Gove 2010). In addition to its simplistic assumptions around
student learning, the model privileges performativity and practical knowledge over theoretical, pedagogical and subject knowledge.

We, by contrast, would argue that pre-service teacher education should be research-informed and delivered by effective partnerships between schools and universities; and should develop critical-thinking skills and an inquiry stance. These elements are essential in order to ensure a well-educated teaching force, prepared to face the multiple challenges of teaching in twenty-first-century schools. A key function of universities here is ‘theorising the epistemological and pedagogical underpinnings of training’, so that professional knowledge does not become simplified to focus only on contemporary practice in schools (Furlong et al. 2006: 41). Because of this commitment, being able to provide research-informed teacher education within the research-rich environments of universities is a shibboleth for many Schools of Education, and most university-led pre-service programmes combine perspectives from educational research with the imperatives of providing pre-service programmes which are ‘demanding, relevant, and practical’ (Furlong et al. 2000: 144). In such ideal programmes both high-quality teaching in the university and inspirational mentoring in partnership schools are informed by research and scholarship. This occurs not least because of the contributions of research-active teacher educators in teaching and adopting a ‘pedagogy of guidance’ (Guile and Lucas 1999) for developing the work of mentors in schools.

4.1 Where were we before School Direct?

In the 25 years prior to the 2010 reforms, it could be argued that England made great progress in attaining the optimal practice-orientated programmes of teacher training, driven – in part it is fair to say – by policy makers of all political hues. But, in our view, there were a number of unwelcome and unhelpful consequences of this ‘(re)turn to the practical’ (see Furlong and Lawn 2010: 6). By 2010 these had already undermined some aspects of the sector’s commitment to the implementation of research-informed teacher education. First, the politicisation of teacher training resulted in an increasing lack of professional control for training providers and left the beleaguered sector subject to short-termism and the vagaries of political ideology (McNamara et al. 2009). Second, the intrusiveness of policy requirements, regulation and accountability restricted the levels of professional engagement with the training process, engendered a technical–rational approach to outcomes, and created a culture of compliance (Menter et al. 2006). The system was highly bureaucratic and increasingly dominated by the ‘discourse of relevance’ (Maguire and Weiner 1994). Third, while there were some undoubted successes in forging outstanding university–school partnerships, the proliferation of reductionist and task-focused partnership arrangements – in which underpinning philosophies, pedagogies and professional trust had not always been well developed – was problematic across the sector as a whole (Childs et al., in press). These weaknesses in some partnership arrangements meant that the sector, as it was by 2010, had been unable to capitalise fully on the potential contributions that universities – and the teacher educators within them – could make to the continuing professional learning of teachers and school improvement (Hurd et al. 2007). Demographic factors were also affecting the sector. For example, many secondary programmes had become unsustainable because of a demographic downturn in secondary pupil numbers – a 35% reduction in the number of secondary pre-service teacher allocations in the three years since 2009. (Christie et al. 2012).

“Universities are important in the provision of teacher education because they give students and teachers space and time for exploration and critical thinking away from the fray.”

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These teacher-education-specific factors, compounded by changes across the university sector as a whole, also limited the potential of some teacher educators to contribute strongly and consistently to research-informed programmes. Research on this occupational group shows that its work has long been characterised by heavier workloads, longer teaching years and less research engagement than other academic groups (Murray 2002). By 2010, successive reforms and an increasingly casualised workforce had eroded some of the traditional roles of HE-based teacher educators and replaced them with other work. For example, many now spent less time in supervising the practicum in schools, but considerable time in managing partnerships with schools, work which Ellis et al. (2011) term ‘relationship maintenance’. Reduction of HE-based teacher educators’ direct involvement in workplace learning led to changed and substantially increased roles for school-based mentors, a model of support that has acknowledged conceptual flaws and problems of implementation at scale (House of Commons Report, 2010).
Given the (re)turn to the practical in teacher training, it comes as little surprise to find strong emphasis placed on experiential, recent and relevant knowledge of schooling within teacher educator professionalism (Murray et al. 2011). This knowledge and experience was prioritised in the recruitment of teacher educators (Ellis et al. 2011) and monitored through external inspections of provision. The knowledge and pedagogical skills of teacher education itself, or knowledge of teaching teachers (Loughran 2006), valued in other nations, were often undervalued or unrecognised by policy makers and across the wider university sector (Murray et al. 2011). Few teacher educators had doctoral qualifications on entry to HE, and many struggled to achieve the requisite depth of research alongside other work. This striving to become research active took place in institutional contexts dominated by the discourses and practices of research performativity, as determined by national legislation and played out in quinquennial research assessment exercises. (These exercises increasingly define what constitutes ‘research’ and ‘research activity’ in Education) (Christie et al. 2012). Pressures for research performativity resulted in increasingly divisive practices around research and its meaning for teacher educators – individually and communally – and new manifestations of historical bifurcations between teaching and research in teacher education (Gilroy and McNamara 2009). Small wonder then that many Schools of Education showed ambivalence in their commitment to supporting research activity (Sikes 2006; Murray et al. 2011), with only 33% of education academics, working in HE at the time, submitted for the Research Assessment Exercise in 2008 (Furlong 2013). As a result of all these factors, by 2010 some universities were struggling to achieve the ideal, specified above, of practical and relevant pre-service programmes, consistently informed by research, and taught, in partnership with schools, by teacher educators who were themselves research active.

4.2 School Direct: The present and the future?

At the time of writing in 2013 only universities which are rated as ‘outstanding’ in Ofsted inspections in England are guaranteed core allocations of trainee places (and that only for one further year). Additionally, School Direct had been scaled up to train 25% of all pre-service teachers in England, even before the small pilot cohort, recruited in 2012, had embarked on their qualification by this route. The implementation of the scheme augurs the loss of a secure financial base for Schools of Education. And, since numbers of School Direct trainees will vary year-on-year – often significantly – the universities’ ability to plan strategically will be severely undermined. And, over time, it is reasonable to predict that the proportion of funding going to universities will reduce as schools increasingly negotiate the best available ‘deals’ to be found across the diversifying market for teacher training provision. Furthermore, School Direct, because of its small-scale units of operation (sometimes only single students in individual schools), is extremely resource-intensive in terms of administration for both universities and schools. A further problem here is that the recently revised inspection framework (Ofsted 2012) has increased expectations of what counts as ‘outstanding’ provision and drastically reduced inspection notice time, meaning that more courses are likely to be found wanting (which will result in the loss of their guaranteed, core allocations). These current developments can only diminish still further the already reduced capacity and capability of universities to engage fully in quasi-marketplaces, such as that of School Direct, and there must now be even greater concerns about the vulnerability of many courses and Schools of Education and even the viability of whole universities (McNamara et al. 2009).

If teacher educators in England were a beleaguered occupational group before 2010, School Direct definitely worsens that position. The current government’s intensification of the discourses of derision around the contributions of HE-based teacher educators have consistently disparaged their expertise, and suggested that they have a negative impact on teachers and, ultimately, on pupil outcomes. The intellectual contributions of HE-based teacher educators to all aspects of our ideal vision of teacher education will now be further diminished. The inability of universities to plan strategically will inevitably lead to the increased casualisation of the teacher education workforce, and thus to an overall loss of knowledge and skills within universities for expert teaching of subjects vital to the school curriculum. Overall, the quality of learning for pre-service teachers is likely to be impoverished as a result of these losses. This impoverishment will be compounded if, in the current economic climate, schools opt for the cheaper route of a professional qualification only (Qualified Teacher Status but no Postgraduate Certificate of Education) for their trainees, leading to a disarticulation of professional and academic qualifications and eventually a two-track entry to gaining a teaching qualification.

Last, but not by any means least, there is a lack of quality control/assurance processes built into School Direct with regard to three key factors. The first is the lack of safeguards around the suitability of schools as training settings; no restrictions have been imposed in allocating places and even schools ‘requiring improvement’ can be used for this purpose. Second, no academic qualifications/subject knowledge entry requirements (e.g. to have a good honours degree) for the intending trainee are specified. Third, there is no incentive or requirement for schools to
work with training providers rated as 'good' or 'outstanding', or indeed with providers that have any experience at all of working in a particular subject area. Like many ideologically determined reforms, School Direct and its accompanying quasi market-driven reforms has distinctly incoherent elements, occurring because it is subject to, and underpinned by, contrary values, principles and regulatory forces. Here these elements have caused a disarticulation between the control (vested in schools) and the accountability mechanisms (vested in training providers) in the system. This disarticulation also has the potential to widen the fracture between professional-only and academic/professional accreditation described above.

4.3 Where to from here?

As this paper has detailed, we have grave reservations about the current government’s reform agenda for teacher education, and most particularly the School Direct route into teaching. It can, we feel, only have an adverse impact on the sustainability of research-informed teacher education in universities; and our fears are shared by many others (see, among others, Furlong 2013; British Educational Research Association [BERA] 2013). In this final section, however, we offer some possible ways forward for the future.

“a key function of universities here is ‘theorising the epistemological and pedagogical underpinnings of training’, so that professional knowledge does not become simplified to focus only on contemporary practice in schools.”

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For all its numerous design faults, the landscape in which the teacher training sector now finds itself operating does open up new possibilities for working in partnership with individual and (loosely coupled) chains of academy schools. In this we can perhaps learn some lessons from the integration of healthcare services in the Netherlands, which Visse et al. (2012: 281) frame as a ‘moral learning process’ that ‘deals with how people who have a stake in the subject at hand, interactively assign, re-interpret and re-negotiate responsibilities’ and do ‘not regard responsibility as instrumental, something that is “assigned” by an authority.’ Likewise the control and managed autonomy, vested by the Government in School Direct and the Teaching Schools, may allow for a re-drawing of partnership boundaries and practices towards the development of a critical pedagogy of teacher education. This would be one in which teacher educator, school and student work together to reclaim the (state-)striated space which the teacher educator has, over time, taken a central role in (self-)regulating. The trio would work together to inculcate an inquiry stance; employing critical thinking skills; problematising dominant discourses and practices; and reflecting on experiential knowledge and how it relates to practical theory. This would allow teacher educators the opportunity to determine and justify more clearly – to themselves and others – what their roles are as partners in teachers’ professional learning across the career course. These we argue are: to develop and maintain a scholarly culture and the capacity for critical thinking about learning to teach and teaching; to provide academic qualifications for teachers and for the continuing professional learning of the teacher workforce; to lead public debates about education policy; to theorise about educational values, processes and practices; and to engage in and with research about educational values, process and practices, and to encourage teachers to do the same. The sector must (re)claim these roles for teacher educators, including the clear recognition of them as public intellectuals (Cochran-Smith 2006), standing at the forefront of their disciplines (Furlong 2013), and making strong and irreplaceable contributions to schooling.

References


5. Educational research and teacher education in higher education institutions in England

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Within the broad theme of ‘Prospects for research-based and research-informed teaching and learning in initial and continuing teacher education’, and the implications of current policy developments for the student experience, my own focus here is the implications of recent developments in Education departments (UDEs) within higher education institutions (HEIs) in England for the exposure of students to research-informed teacher education.

5.1 Policies affecting UDEs

The external operating environment of departments of Education in English higher education institutions is changing rapidly, particularly in the context of changes in initial teacher education, the reform of higher education funding, and cutbacks in public expenditure.

The broad drift of current policy in relation to teacher education in England was prefigured in the 2010 White Paper The Importance of Teaching (Department for Education 2010). While recognising some continuing role for universities, this presaged a further and significant erosion of the higher education presence in teacher education nationally. Some statements by Ministers and officials have suggested that the Government may have rowed back somewhat from its more extreme ambitions in this respect but the overall direction of travel towards school-led teacher training is certainly being maintained.

Cuts in secondary initial teacher training (ITT) numbers have already impacted on institutions that do not have the highest Ofsted grades and virtually all institutions may now face cuts in core numbers as a result of the new Ofsted inspection framework and a renewed emphasis on school-based training routes – in particular the rapid roll-out of School Direct and the possibility that at least half of all ITT numbers will be allocated via that scheme in two years’ time. Even if overall numbers are retained nationally, the volatility of funding from year to year and between different universities could be quite considerable.

The latest review of the teaching standards in England to which teacher training courses have to work reflects a strongly craft-oriented view of teaching, which attaches only limited significance to educational theory and research, and makes it likely that schools will increasingly be in the lead.

Meanwhile, it is not only initial teacher training in universities that has been under pressure: so too has the continuing education and professional development of teachers. Home student recruitment to diploma and Master’s courses in Education has been declining in many universities. The National Scholarship Scheme for Professional Development is currently limited to work in relation to special educational needs, English, Maths and Science, and is unlikely ever to produce the level of support for teachers’ professional development envisaged by the previous Government. Although the Government argues that some funding for this is now in school budgets,
the transactional costs of accessing this for university courses are likely to be substantially more than under earlier systems.

In research, the new approach by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to doctoral training through doctoral training centres is restricting the availability of studentships to a limited number of universities. Over recent years, ESRC funding for educational research projects has been declining, even though funding for research in business and management studies and in other social sciences has been growing. Core funding to universities for educational research has been affected as well by a reduction in the total amount of quality research (QR) funding for Education after the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008 and this has now been exacerbated by the removal of funding for 2nd activity.

Project funding for educational research has been affected by funding cuts in Government departments. Some of the arm's-length bodies that have funded educational research in the past, such as the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA) and the General Teaching Council of England (GTCE), have been abolished, and any research funding available through key stakeholders in the new landscape, such as the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) (formerly the National College for School Leadership which was merged with the Teaching Agency) or Teaching Schools and local federations of schools, is unlikely to be on the same scale.

Opportunities for consultancy activities, including non-award-bearing continuing professional development (CPD), have recently been reduced by funding cuts to local authorities’ INSET and school-improvement budgets. Some local authorities are now abandoning this aspect of their work altogether, so schools and colleges are turning to other providers for support, including private providers as well as universities.

In January 2012, even before these changes had fully materialised, a report from a British Educational Research Association (BERA)/Universities’ Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) working group that I chaired concluded that the teacher training reforms were likely to have a damaging effect on some Education departments (BERA-UCET Working Group on Education Research 2012). For a variety of reasons, academic research in Education had been experiencing a downturn and it was clear that Education research was contracting faster than other areas of social research. The links between Education research and teacher education were already varied and fragile and we noted the likelihood of future reductions in overall staffing in Education and increased workload demands. These would make it less possible for more junior staff to be research active, while a lower take-up of higher degrees in Education could affect the future supply line for researchers. In other words, there was a danger of a ‘perfect storm’.

In the subsequent year it has become clear that the combination of these threats poses serious questions, not only about the future of education research and about the very viability of some education departments, but also about the quality of teacher education in those Education departments that remain. In particular, there is a threat that the link between teacher education and educational research will be weakened further. Indeed, in at least one research-intensive university a formal split between the two activities is currently being contemplated and many see this as a prelude to a withdrawal from initial teacher education.

5.2 The role of research in teacher education

However, there is a strong argument, set out most recently in an important new book by John Furlong (2013), the former Head of Education at Oxford University, that teacher training ought to have strong links with the liberal education traditions of universities rather than being carried out in a purely instrumental educational environment. In his model, practice needs to be informed by rigorous theory and research produced in the same institutions and, where possible, by those lecturers engaged in teacher education itself. This is the argument used by many universities for maintaining a strong presence in teacher education even in the present policy context.

Significantly, in its recent report entitled Great teachers: Attracting, training and retaining the best, the House of Commons Select Committee on Education argued that:

> a diminution of universities’ role in teacher training could bring considerable demerits…[T]he highest-quality initial teacher education…will involve significant school experience but include theoretical and research elements as well, as in the best systems internationally and in much provision here. (House of Commons Education Committee 2012)
Nevertheless, the actual relationship between research and practice remains contentious. A criticism often made of the sort of research that achieves high ratings in the periodic Research Assessment Exercises was that it undervalued practice-related research. It is also the case that, in some universities, Education research is already somewhat detached from the work of teacher educators. Indeed, data on the nature of the Education workforce tend to reflect this, with fewer staff entered in the RAE, more staff on teaching-only contracts and more casualised employment than in cognate disciplines. Nevertheless, in many universities research still informs course design and influences the broader culture in which teacher education takes place. It is also likely that the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise, with its increased emphasis on ‘impact’, will place greater emphasis on the sort of ‘applied’, ‘action’ and ‘practice-based’ research that was under-represented in past RAEs, as may the broader pressures in higher education for enhanced ‘public engagement’.

There have been a number of attempts to ensure that teacher education and research become more closely linked. ‘Teacher as researcher’ approaches have featured in many initial teacher education courses since the 1980s. Under New Labour, the National Educational Research Forum (NERF) sought to make educational research more relevant to educational policy and practice. Evidence-based and evidence-informed policy has been a mantra of all recent governments and, under the current Coalition government, a ‘clinical practice’ and health service model of teacher training is increasingly being advocated.

“practice needs to be informed by rigorous theory and research produced in the same institutions and, where possible, by those lecturers engaged in teacher education itself.”

Whitty

Finding meaningful ways of linking research and initial teacher training so that teachers’ own ‘practical theories’ are increasingly evidence-informed is a major challenge for teacher educators and this is something on which universities and schools need to work together. At present there is considerable variability in the extent and quality of such work even within university-led teacher training partnerships. It is also the case that some of the teaching school federations that are likely to have a major role in teacher training in the future put a strong emphasis on practice-related research and evidence-based practice and national funding for this is available, notably via the Education Endowment Foundation.

However, the current fragmentation of the education system, and with it potentially the teacher education system, into a ‘system of many small systems’ (Bell 2012) means that the student experience is likely to become even more variable than before. In this I suspect there will be both losses and gains. It is likely that some students will never be exposed to ‘active researchers’ in the conventional sense, while a few students working in teaching schools and especially university training schools may well have greater opportunities to engage in practice-based research than ever in the past. In this situation, there is a need for some guidelines on research-informed teacher education to ensure at least some commonality. But now that academies and free schools will not need to employ teachers with qualified teacher status (QTS), some new teachers will never have been exposed to educational research. This makes research-informed CPD more important than ever.

Evidence from around the world indicates that the most effective teachers are those who are able to combine excellent practical skills with the ability to understand and use research in their development of their teaching. In Finland, for example, new teachers take a programme which combines clinical experience with a strong emphasis on using research to inform their practice. In the light of this, BERA has recently established an inquiry investigating the role and contribution of research in teacher education and its association with school improvement. Over the course of the next few months BERA will be commissioning a range of papers and taking evidence from across the UK and internationally. The aim will be to stimulate a more informed debate about the consequences of current policy in England.

5.3 Conclusion

Now is a particularly good time to launch that exercise and link it to the wider debate about evidence-informed practice in education that has recently been initiated by a paper produced for the Department of Education by Ben Goldacre (2013), which includes a recommendation that research literacy should be part of the initial and continuing professional education of teachers. But to ensure that research-informed teacher education is part of the student experience in all forms of initial and continuing education for teachers, teacher educators will need to
work together with their partners, including schools and groups of schools, to maintain research capability and foster a research culture in the teaching profession as a whole.

References


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