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The contribution of Teacher education to universities: a case study for international teacher educators

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the initial stage of a research project which aims to develop deeper understanding of the contribution teacher education, as a sub-discipline within Education, makes to Higher Education in England. The study is located in the intersection between the domains of teacher education and higher education scholarship, which in England represents a contested and ambiguous professional space. Tensions between competing accountability measures, pulling away from university-based to exclusively school-based teacher education, are exacerbated by proposed policy changes arising from the government's recent market review. Findings drawn from analysis of qualitative data from a national survey are discussed in the context of Elizabeth Povinelli's critique of late liberalism and previous scholarship on the nature of teacher educators' work. Evidence from the study demonstrates numerous benefits to higher education of hosting teacher education departments, including contributions to standard metrics, regional development and knowledge exchange within a strategic social justice agenda. However, teacher educators themselves may find articulating these benefits difficult, because of marginalisation from the dominant ways of achieving and accounting for excellence in the modern university. These findings offer a cautionary tale to international colleagues whose governments may be embarking on equivalent paths of teacher education reform.

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Introduction

As in many other countries in the world, university-based teacher education in England has been overhauled by government over the past two decades. School-based teacher education, sometimes overseen by corporate and philanthropic entities (such as Teach First, Teach for Australia and Teach America) has become the preferred business model in the US (Zeichner, 2006), Australia (Fitzgerald & Knipe,

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2016), England (Ellis, 2024), the Netherlands (White et al., 2022) and elsewhere. The political, professional and social impact of the apparent de-intellectualisation of teacher education are well documented, most recently in a major book on the subject (Ellis, 2024). Government rationales for this re-positioning are bold and open and presented as inextricably linked to the move towards a content-based, (and specifically in England), Hirschean-influenced, core curriculum. For example, the long-serving UK schools minister, Nick Gibb has identified ‘education experts’ as the enemy of ‘the knowledge-rich curriculum’ (Gibb, 2017) and, in his role as Minister for Education and Youth, Alan Tudge articulated his admiration for these policies in Australia (Tudge, 2021). Such politicians draw a tight, axiomatic line between teacher education, teaching quality, student outputs and economic growth. Teacher educators have articulated the problems with this simplistic formula and attempts to resist these moves have been collectively articulated by the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) in the UK. UCET is a voluntary membership-based organisation of Higher Education (HE) Teacher Education departments, which provides an authoritative voice, advocacy and espouses good practice in the field. A notable silence in these debates, however, is the voice of higher education itself, with only a few dissenting voices. Despite universities having long histories of involvement and investment in teacher education, vice chancellors, university presidents, and principals appear to have taken a wholly supine approach to these momentous changes. This article attempts to address this gap in the debate by considering if, and in what ways, universities benefit from their involvement in teacher education.

We take our cue from John Furlong’s extensive work on the problematics of the political responses to the situation of teacher education in universities in England and the contrasting response in Wales, where, unusually, the role of the university in teacher education has been enhanced in recent years (Furlong, 2019). Furlong suggests that the strengthened role of universities in teacher education in Wales ‘will enrich the universities themselves’ (2019, p. 586). The extent to which universities are enriched by Education is discussed here in relation to a research project which aimed to develop a stronger understanding of Education as a valid subject discipline in English Higher Education (Wyse, 2020), and how it contributes to the HE sector, focussing particularly on the sub-discipline of teacher education.

Universities have long been involved in the education of teachers in England, but the 1972 ‘James Report’ (DES, 1972), which recommended that teaching should become an all-graduate profession, cemented Initial Teacher Education (ITE) firmly into the preserve of universities. Teacher Training Colleges were incorporated into university structures and validating partnerships and for a period of over 20 years, all entry to the profession was from a university/HE route. This domination started to wane in the 1990s; within the UK. England has perhaps experienced the strongest pull away from university-led ITE and teacher education has been largely school-based here since 1992 (Ellis, 2010). By 1993, schools could train their own teachers through multiple iterations, including School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) (DfE, 1993), followed by Training Schools, and then Teaching Schools (DfE, 2010) and the School Direct training route (DfE, 2012), thereby reducing university allocations. An equilibrium was reached, with ITE places split approximately evenly between schools and universities (Noble-Rogers, 2016), although many universities also accredited school-based provision. These

ebbs and flows in university involvement and prominence in teacher education form the backdrop to our study, where university teacher educators' identity exists in a highly contested and ambiguous space.

Along with an investigative aim to understand what teacher education contributes to the university, our research also has a declared strategic aim, which is to assert the significance of Education as a discipline in universities, contributing to institutional sustainability. One impetus for this was the introduction of the Market Review of Teacher Education in England (DfE, 2021), proposing a re-organisation of teacher education, assertively moving the responsibility even further away from universities towards other providers and newcomers to the HE market. This included the creation of the National Institute of Teaching, a de facto university with degree awarding powers, offering pre-service teaching qualifications (NIOT, 2022). Thus, university teacher education departments experienced a two-fold threat: political marginalisation or removal from initial teacher education, coupled with compulsion to withdraw from provision altogether because of sector volatility. This paper is conceived as an agentic response to this imminent instability, drawing from a survey of teacher educators the perceived benefits and contributions of teacher education departments within their institutional settings.

Themes in the data: two stories

While the findings from the survey are discussed later in the paper, it is worth noting from the outset that two stories quickly emerged from the data and the research process. The first represented the substantive content of the research: perspectives on the benefits afforded to universities hosting teacher education and the challenges arising. The second was a notable reticence and self-deprecation, a 'stuttering' expression of negotiation and fluidity of identity (MacLure, 2011) in a significant number of fractured responses that disrupt the survey structure of question and answer. We concluded that it would be disingenuous to adopt a 'bland', 'innocent' and 'uncomplicated' interpretation (MacLure, 2011, p. 998) of such complexity. As discussed in more detail later in the paper, the responses were fewer than expected and where they did emerge, some teacher educators struggled to articulate strengths in line with the lexicon of the successful modern university, sometimes calling explicit attention to this. Awareness of this second, unexpected finding from the study is therefore kept in play throughout the article.

Education: a distinct and different discipline?

The paper aligns with, and potentially contributes to, national conversations, notably the British Education Research Association's (BERA) strategic project on *Education: The State of the Discipline* (Boyle et al., 2021) and the collection of essays in Ellis (2024). Findings from the former study characterise experienced colleagues working in Education departments as Early Career Researchers experiencing heavy teaching loads, often working in their second career as non-traditional academics with temporary contracts. This is compounded by the nature of ITE programmes in comparison to their traditional academic counterparts. For the latter, universities have autonomy in provision and to some degree regulation, whereas for the former curriculum is becoming

increasingly prescribed by Government/DfE and is externally regulated. Teacher educators' work has inherent complexity (Czerniawski, 2018); where identity shedding and replacing is a part of the transition to the university role. Seasoned senior leaders experience a 'painful reconciliation process ... as they shed their former identity as a teacher and develop their novice identity as a teacher educator' (ibid:9). Teacher educators are 'first order' practitioners in Higher Education, but their core work is 'second order' practice supporting first order trainee practitioners in education settings (Murray, 2002). They straddle multiple communities of practice, deploying interconnected knowledge, skills and expertise in leadership, mentoring, coaching, pastoral care, curriculum development, pedagogy, research, critical enquiry, gatekeeping, brokering and collaboration.

Where HE in England has experienced a cultural shift towards a more explicitly competitive and metrics-driven 'knowledge economy' (DBIS, 2016), exploring colleagues' experiences and responses is critical in order '... to understand the pressures and strains on academic life caused by the gradual incursion of neoliberal regimes and performance agendas into the UK HE sector' (Boyle et al., 2021, p. 40). This informs our emerging 'second story', about why teacher educators' articulation of narratives of value and success may often be constrained.

Elizabeth Povinelli's analysis of late liberalism could serve as an interpretative framework for the ellipses in the data. Her argument situates late liberalism as a social project—'activities of fixing and co-substantiating phenomena, aggregating and assembling disparate elements into a common form and purpose' (2013; p.238)—which offers a way of reading the psychosocial effects of working in the metrics-heavy, accountability-saturated cultures that have come to define the modern university. Indeed, Povinelli further suggests that late liberalism 'is a set of dominant patterns, constantly tinkered with and revised according to local materials and conditions, according to which life is fabricated' (ibid). Thus, we might consider the life of teacher educators in HE as fabricated by a set of disparate and discrete elements (e.g. research metrics, accountability measures) that, though ill-fitting, have nevertheless been co-substantiated and now dominate the discursive space, making it challenging to articulate evidence of value or success. Further, the binaried nature of public debate about politics and public issues in general—which has intensified since 2016 – adds to the sense of paranoia in the profession. Noting the steep rise in 'fear and anger' in the 2016 presidential election campaign, US teacher educators Smagorinsky and colleagues felt compelled to write and publish an open letter to candidates for their English teaching foundation programme, defending the liberal principles on which the programme was founded (Smagorinsky et al., 2017). In the UK leading teacher educators, suspicious of governmental attempts to control the narrative, have issued subject access requests and discovered files about them at the Department for Education (Fazackerly, 2023).

Povinelli asserts that 'a key means by which late liberalism aggregates social worlds is through figurations of tense, eventfulness and ethical substance' (2011; p.11). She further explores the key notion of 'eventfulness' through the concept of 'quasi-events' that 'never quite achieve the status of having occurred or taken place. They neither happen nor not happen' (p.13). The distinctive nature of teacher educators' academic life as described earlier (Czerniawski, 2018; Murray, 2002) would seem to be disproportionately full of quasi-events (e.g. engaging with mentors, containing student performance anxiety,

professional accreditation documentation, managing partnerships) which remain unrecognised and are difficult to report as examples of excellence or even contribution. The act of narrating these as a claim for excellence against external criteria is thus stymied by the presupposition that each aspect of the teacher educator's performance should be accounted for through a discrete measure. This might have particular application and complication for colleagues working in Education teams in English universities, experiencing competing internal and external accountabilities.

The aforementioned tensions involved in university-based teacher education provision are well documented. As early as 1990, Ball (cited in Furlong, 2019) called attention to the public 'discourse of derision' surrounding this sub-discipline in England. In the US Zeichner (2006) cites a landmark article in the *New York Times* in 2005 entitled 'Who Needs Education Schools', which set the tone for a period of political scrutiny of the work of teacher educators. In Australia the picture is similar. Fitzgerald and Knipe (2016) note that, 'National policy solutions have emerged that increasingly emphasise regulation and panoptic surveillance of ITE programmes, teacher educators and teacher education graduates.' (p. 259). Elsewhere, Furlong (2013) has comprehensively charted the political moves, which have overseen the attenuation of university input into initial teacher education in England since the late 1980s, inevitably affecting teacher educator professionalism and identity within a sub-discipline that has always struggled for recognition within HE (Arvaja, 2018). Intractable tensions have long arisen from the public 'policy problem': between selectivity and diversification of the workforce, in the undervaluing of pedagogic knowledge and expertise and in the tussle between regulation and deregulation of provision and accountability (Cochran-Smith, 2005). The 'structural fragility' of the business-as-usual of many teacher education departments was recently uncovered by Ellis et al. (2020), where responses from diverse contexts across 4 continents showed that the COVID-19 pandemic had exposed the unsustainability of existing systems, habitually concealed by historical norms of ITE practice. In a sub-discipline long criticised for its epistemological weakness and insecurity (Furlong, 2019), leaders acknowledged that departments are 'running on empty' (Ellis et al., 2020), with employment characterised by casualised contracts, lower qualifications, limited professional development and unrecognised research (Furlong, 2019).

The wider context of universities in England

In the UK universities themselves have come under significant scrutiny in terms of 'neo-liberal'¹ accountability measures, formalised in the 2016 white paper (DBIS, 2016). The market obsession with 'excellence' is understood to have had a detrimental impact on the quality of teaching and learning and the nature and quality of student/teacher relationships (see Bainbridge et al., 2017), reinforcing current policy and power structures while eschewing alternative ideologies and wider educational purposes. This leads to specific challenges for teacher educators. While they are as accountable as other academics in terms of qualifications and research outputs, the qualities needed to generate and maintain high-quality partnerships and demonstrate credibility with students and placement settings are not recognised in university promotion categories (McIntyre & Brooks, 2020). Once in post, accountability frameworks continue to pull colleagues in opposite directions: for

senior leadership roles, criteria for research quality may rule out members of teacher education teams more readily focused on practical impact rather than REF outcomes. In addition to the internal HE quality assurance procedures (which can be considerable), providers of ITE in England also undergo an inspection by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) at least every 6 years (changing to 3 years from 2024/25). Ofsted is a non-ministerial department of the UK government responsible for inspection of providers of education, training and care. Such an inspection is high stakes for ITE providers as being found to be non-compliant will probably result in withdrawal of accreditation, therefore not being permitted to train teachers at all. Success in an ITE inspection is qualitatively different from writing a journal article or leading a research bid. Although these differences have long been tacitly understood, the current focus on Research, Knowledge Exchange and Teaching Excellence frameworks (respectively REF, KEF and TEF) has led to institutions directly translating the consequences of rankings into tangible, contractual arrangements for colleagues. This explicitly represents 'an advancing agenda of performativity and accountability in HE and the discipline of education, reflected in a growth in audit cultures' (Boyle et al., 2021, p. 5). Professionals in universities habitually experience conditions of 'supercomplexity', 'fighting their corner' amidst competing value systems, under assault from multiple discourses which may present impossible, unresolvable dilemmas (Barnett, 2008, p. 193). Beyond disparities of discipline, it is likely that such pressures produce effects which can be understood in terms of ethnicity, gender, age and disability, thereby contributing to the broader pattern of inequalities in higher education.

In summary, teacher education teams must justify their existence in the alternative universe of exacting, metrics-led academia, while holding a distinctive breadth of expertise, knowledge and skill aligned to external accountability. Within this complex picture, we turn around John Furlong's key question about the knowledge higher education is best placed to contribute to student teacher learning (2019), asking instead: 'What forms of learning and professional knowledge is teacher education best placed to contribute to the university?'

Methodology: origins, aims and advocacy

The data were collected through the UCET network. As a pan-UK organisation—due to devolved education policy—UCET has differing structures in the four nations and operates in the context of divergent governments and ITE policies. However, the issues faced by Teacher Educators in universities can be similar across the UK, so the data collection was UK-based rather than limited to England. In this first stage of the study, we were also interested to see if the different arrangements for teacher education in the four jurisdictions would have any impact on the nature of the responses and therefore indicate potential sites of comparison. We were also aware of the influence of Westminster on arrangements for teacher education in the other nations in the UK, despite differing formal arrangements, and we wanted to see if this would be reflected in the data. For example, in Scotland the General Teaching Council have recently signalled their intention to stop operating the Student Placement System (GTCS, n.d.). On face value, this may seem like empowerment of the teacher education providers, however an alternative view may be that

they are being handed greater responsibility without any related benefit. A further example, from Scotland, relates to the desire of Teach First to move north of the border. The ITE providers have, so far, worked together to resist this policy development (Hepburn, 2023). However, it may only be a matter of time before Holyrood, and the other devolved assemblies follow the lead of England, especially if there is change at regional government level.

Our research group initially involved members of the UCET sub-committee for Continuing Professional Development (CPD), drawing in other interested colleagues involved in university-based teacher education. The research design was shaped through online meetings where discussions drew on the diverse experience, knowledge and professional and political awareness of members of the group. The aim of the research is to develop a stronger understanding of Teacher Education as a discipline in UK HE and how it can survive, thrive and contribute within the Higher Education policy framework, our key research question being: ‘How does (or could) an education department or faculty contribute to the University’s strategic aims?’

The research was designed from a position of advocacy for teacher education’s contribution to HE, acknowledging that teacher education is embattled both institutionally and politically. Emergent findings could potentially raise consciousness amongst the teacher education community in defending and advancing the sub-discipline’s positioning within HE in general and in discussions with their own university executives in particular, amidst structures and priorities that may be constructed as unquestionable (Giroux, 2011). It contributes to ongoing debate within Education where it has been argued that greater attention should be paid to research that listens to stakeholder voices (Boyle et al., 2021). As Barnett (2010) points out, cultures tend to reference inwardly, to offer a sense of stability through collective understanding of the way a group or organisation operates; however, they ‘gain their bearings’ through contrast with other cultures, by being distinctive. Investigating and sharing teacher educators’ responses and strategies amidst the current challenges potentially offers insights into how this distinctiveness can be recognised and beneficially fostered.

The online survey

An online questionnaire was issued to members of the professional association UCET via its committee structures, reaching participants currently or previously involved in teacher education. The questionnaire comprised the following open questions:

- (1) What benefits does teacher education bring to your university?
- (2) What do you feel are the most significant challenges for university teacher education?
- (3) How do you negotiate and resolve the challenges identified in the previous question?
- (4) How can university metrics (i.e. published measures of accountability) capture the value of teacher education?
- (5) Are there benefits of teacher education that are currently not captured by these metrics, but are captured elsewhere? If so, how else can these benefits be demonstrated?

- (6) How does teacher education contribute to your university's regional, national and global agendas?
- (7) Can you identify examples of excellence in which teacher education contributes strongly towards the achievement of your university's strategic aims?

The decision to use open questions requiring considerable reflection was carefully deliberated. It was felt that colleagues would value space to express their qualitative views and experiences, inviting them to exercise greater choice and scope than would have been the case with a closed question survey. The survey had a reach that might not have been achieved with alternative approaches such as interviews or focus groups and was designed to capture authentic views, experiences and agendas to pave the way for further qualitative investigation. Ethical approval was gained through the lead University, asserting that informed consent would be secured, there was a right to withdrawal and confidentiality would be assured. Beyond this, ethical discussion continued throughout the project in navigating the line between research and advocacy. All responses were imported into the analysis tool, *Dedoose* for initial coding, followed by re-analysis to collate evidence under broad themes through identifying co-occurrence of codes. The data was then re-interrogated to build and evidence a richer and more detailed picture.

Response issues: co-constructing meaning

The extent of engagement with the survey was somewhat disappointing. 589 people opened the link but only 43 participants finished the survey, providing the data accounted for here. Of these, nearly all were from England, therefore this analysis focuses on the English context, incorporating single responses from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland where they illuminated generic points. The responses received were generally detailed and heartfelt, so while we acknowledged that some could not spare the time to engage, we felt that this was not necessarily the whole story. Through our position of advocacy, we shared emergent findings and themes through a series of discussions at professional conferences and seminars: International Professional Development Association (IPDA) and UCET conferences and a BERA Teacher Education and Development seminar. Colleagues were invited to provide insights in relation to emerging messages and implications, teasing out issues and tensions in the data and providing valuable insights about the questions and response rate.

The data undoubtedly 'rang true', with widespread agreement that teacher education is differently accounted for and struggles for HE recognition. The relatively low response was considered to reflect the time and thought needed, weighed against intensified workloads, fractional contracts and transitional identities, along with possible survey fatigue. Participants suggested that focus group or interview discussion would have enabled us to delve deeper in the additional comments section of the questionnaire. However, the discussions also gave further indications to underline and augment Povinelli's (2013) argument outlined above. There were tensions between feeling like 'misfits', whilst acknowledging the need to take responsibility for strategic self-promotion where it 'doesn't come easily'. It was suggested that the fragmentation of continually 'shifting sands' of education policy combined with systemic

restructuring, fractures relationships and disrupts longitudinal projects and funding streams, such that there is always a sense of having to keep starting again. These understandings were taken into account in turning to a more detailed analysis of the survey data.

Thematic discussion of survey data

In the following section, the data is discussed according to the broad sequence of survey questions, with illustrative quotations extracted directly from the qualitative responses.

Benefits teacher education brings to the university

The survey identified ways in which teacher education benefits universities beyond its own programmes, offering local and regional community links and status, research opportunities and impact and HE pedagogical expertise, thus making a central contribution to programme quality and outreach across the disciplines.

Anchoring the university within the region

The benefit most frequently and confidently identified is that teacher education establishes and brokers the university's status in the wider community through partnerships with local schools and settings to supply the teaching workforce. Teacher educators are highly regarded as '... governors, trustees, advisors, consultants, researchers and an embedded part of the school ecology in the region'. Meanwhile, teacher education alumni, moving into mentoring and senior and executive leadership, become advocates increasing social mobility by widening access and participation into HE. However, the crucial role of teacher education in this 'pipeline' of recruitment to undergraduate, postgraduate and professional development courses in all subjects, key to HE recruitment, is not necessarily perceived as recognised or valued within the university.

Pedagogic and leadership expertise

More than half of respondents noted teacher educators' specialist knowledge, expertise, skills and qualifications in pedagogy and andragogy, which cannot be assumed in other HE subject areas. They bring critical perspectives to professional HE practice, linking theory, research and policy development, e.g. in inclusion, technological enhancement and evaluating education reform. This contributes deep understanding to enhance programme quality. Experienced leaders and mentors from different phases of education become experts and capacity builders in new HE roles, leading qualifications in professional development, academic practice and 'Advance HE' professional accreditation. Informally, they have an invaluable role in encouraging pedagogic enquiry and enhancement '... by osmosis as we rub along with colleagues ...', through interdisciplinary networking, although their pedagogic expertise may be '... under-recognised and poorly utilised'.

Purpose, reputation and reciprocal research

Teacher education brings a 'sense of purpose, mission and socio-economic responsibility' to the university, aligning with university values, civil engagement and political

commitment to 'levelling up'. Institutional reputation and status are enhanced locally, regionally, nationally and internationally, attracting further recruitment (hence income) and funding for development and KE projects. There are opportunities for research reciprocity, through partnerships and networks, with impact on practice and policy. This contributes to the University's research profile, while drawing school practitioners into the research environment. The university is thus proudly depicted as the regional hub of education, particularly where teacher education is the founding discipline, a 'core and foundational function', deeply felt 'in our bones', representing the very essence of the institution.

Significant challenges for teacher education

Challenges of role and identity arise, where teacher education is perceived as lacking in support and both internal and external recognition. The emphasis on education becoming more corporate, prescriptive and performative while navigating parallel accountability frameworks within and beyond HE is keenly felt, leading to additional pressures and expectations compared with other disciplines.

Political interference and uncertainty

In the context of the market review (DfE, 2021), which was felt to 'marginalise and devalue' university teacher education, over half of respondents felt that government intervention causes political uncertainty, loss of autonomy and lack of trust in reform. Policy was described as 'reckless', with unprecedented government 'interference' undermining planning, funding, investment and partnership work. Teacher educators struggled to discern any sensible strategy as their departments navigated a confusing plethora of routes into teaching and selective bursary allocation. The complexity of educating teachers is felt to be overlooked and reduced to 'training' that is 'more instrumentally focused and less educationally rich'. A performative, prescriptive ITE curriculum causes stagnation and closes down debate leading to one comment that 'pedagogy is stuck about 20 years ago'. Challenging this is risky, but there are fears that these ideological changes may reduce recruitment however excellent the provision. HE teacher educators are faced with bridging changes, filling gaps and sustaining partnerships with 'very little in the tank' while the work continues to intensify and partner capacity is not guaranteed: current concerns included resourcing the Early Career Framework, securing placements and recruiting mentors. Political upheaval was felt to 'threaten how we use our resources and infrastructure effectively and efficiently to meet the education skills needs of the region'; investment to maintain effective relationships provided a buffer and counterpoint.

Unsupportive university culture and insufficient resourcing

Teacher educators' uneasy positioning in HE was expressed disturbingly: they are 'bumped and bruised'; they occupy a "unique and powerful space but do not 'own' it . . ."; they are told they are 'not good enough . . . when in fact they have a very specific domain knowledge and skill set'. Their distinctive work is widely perceived as poorly understood and resourced within the university, noting lack of transparency about the balance of income, contribution and resourcing for complex programmes. Partnerships,

placements, professional qualifications and school visits create additional pressure, significantly heavier workloads and different academic timelines. Administrative capacity is increasingly stretched to accommodate such work and it can feel that priorities lie elsewhere. It is difficult to make impactful, practice-orientated research ‘count’. Respondents referred to an ‘identity crisis’ and a ‘negative narrative’ to which colleagues may contribute and which is rarely challenged.

Surveillance culture

Over a third of respondents mentioned Ofsted as a significant challenge. Inspection preparation absorbs an inordinate amount of time and energy which is believed to detract from curriculum development, student support and research. It is seen by some as more deeply problematic, questioning ‘our very integrity’ where ‘constant scrutiny’ is ‘exhausting and not conducive to creativity, ingenuity and development’. Ofsted’s politicised agenda, as well as conflicting with HE priorities, is criticised as being ‘misaligned’ with the ITE Core Content framework, undermining its own integrity.

Meeting the challenges

Teacher educators identified a variety of ways to ‘own our own space and change the narrative’, although some felt they were ‘fighting a losing battle’ without power or authority. While understanding requirements, maintaining compliance and ‘playing the game’, they looked for strategies to maintain values-based, tried and tested, research-based, inclusive approaches. Notably, some responses to this question were aspirational, rather than reflecting current practices.

Maintaining excellence

Teacher educators’ prime focus is on academic development of excellent, ‘critically engaged reflective teachers’, with autonomy, knowledge and understanding that they are able to apply in context and a commitment to their own lifelong learning. This involves not merely delivering the Core Content Framework but interpreting, applying and augmenting it, educating trainees in ‘the “why” as well as the “how”’. A positive experience for student teachers and mentors encourages further recruitment and cements partnerships. It was felt that separating research and teaching roles might address conflicts of priority and workload pressure.

Dialogue and negotiation with key stakeholders

Nationally, teacher educators raise their profile through UCET and other professional organisations, engaging with policy debates and developing strategy. Authentic representation of university teacher education in the media is needed to counteract unfavourable voices with powerful influence. Locally and regionally, maintaining close, trusting working relationships with stakeholders is considered crucial to develop shared understanding, solve problems and plan strategically and operationally to navigate (or mitigate) policy change.

Advocacy in institutional and political dialogue

Teacher educators feel responsible for ensuring university senior leaders are fully informed about sector developments and opportunities, needing creative strategies to secure senior support and call attention to positive outcomes and impact on the university's terms. As well as contributions to key metrics such as TEF, KEF, REF and employability, this involved making visible additional opportunities such as Subject Knowledge Enhancement, in-service CPD and international recruitment. Several respondents aspired to change the political ground rules: removing education from governmental power, reinstating the value of universities in ITE and reconceiving sector quality assurance (Ofsted).

Identity development

Above all, teacher educators want their complex academic-professional identity to be understood, '... recognising their specific knowledge and skills, but also [their] unique place in school and university wide growth'. Nurturing of these distinctive roles would enable experienced professionals to flourish in second careers. 'Robust debate' might be needed to tackle systemic and organisational contradictions and anomalies that create barriers to support and progression.

Capturing value: metrics and beyond

The question of how university metrics can capture the value of teacher education provoked a wide range of responses, indicating contributions made to generic metrics while recognising what is missed or under-represented. While some asserted their proactivity, others were embattled or waiting to be asked, and expressed concerns about the political forces at work. Notably, nine respondents did not answer this question.

Demonstrating value through data

For some, demonstrating value is unproblematic, with confident assertion that TEF, REF and KEF ... capture Teacher Education with ease, as it not only impacts on student experience, and staff share their expertise with the wider university, we also provide CPD support across partnerships, as well as then research the impact widely. Teacher education should be able to contribute well towards HE retention, graduate outcome and employment and student satisfaction in the national surveys. Research and knowledge exchange impact can also be significant through partnerships and networks. It was felt that more prominent national data on how universities contribute to initial and continuing teacher education would be useful. 'Proceed' metrics for student employment (Office for Students, 2021) might help, particularly if subdivided to show public sector employability and impact.

Challenges of internal and external accountability

Four respondents answered that they did not know how the value of teacher education is represented in university metrics, others had no immediate answer and one mentioned Ofsted which only applies to teacher education. It is admittedly difficult, for example the

REF does not recognise much teacher education research. Lack of time may result in incomplete or inaccurate representation, needing more ‘expert flagging’.

Making better use of existing metrics

Multiple metrics that apply specifically to teacher education (QTS, QA of mentoring) are considered to be poorly understood internally. Alumni qualifications and career and employability statistics could be considered alongside course recruitment, retention and completion figures but even where this data exists it is not taken into account. CPD evaluation and impact can contribute to the KEF if this is engineered, but it may go unrecorded through lack of time or limited awareness. Research publication and presentation within the teacher education community is perhaps more diffuse and practice-orientated than in other domains, disseminated through professional journals, practitioner conferences, subject associations and research degree supervision, requiring additional effort to capture impact.

Qualitative complexity

The longitudinal, interconnected and reciprocal impact of HE teacher education on schools, cultures and systems, described as ‘obvious’ by survey respondents, is not habitually or systematically tracked. It needs qualitative representation incorporating narratives, testimonials and case studies, demonstrating ‘growth of pedagogic learning, critical thinking and teacher identity’ and tracking teachers’ professional trajectories longitudinally. Many outcomes are felt to be ‘immeasurable’, ‘soft’ and ‘for the future’: ‘often numbers only tell a small part of the story and teacher education is very much a story. Including stories of staff, students and partner schools would create a better picture’. Measures assuming one-way transfer of knowledge, skills and outcomes are insufficiently nuanced to discern reciprocal benefits, e.g. mentors’ contributions to HE teaching and leadership excellence. Richer partnership knowledge exchange with other disciplines could afford new business and consultancy opportunities.

Contribution to regional, national and international university agendas

Notwithstanding benefits and challenges already discussed, teacher educators often expressed their contribution on their own terms, through a subject and professional lens, while others implied that understanding wider contributions to HE lay beyond their remit and capability. Nevertheless, education principles that transcended the current ‘instrumental’ logic were powerfully expressed, arguing for the university as a centre of education excellence with teacher education at the heart.

A regional hub for education advancement

Teacher educators’ recognition of the university’s status and positioning as a regional hub for improving education quality and aspiration is clearly visible in the data, but this can arguably only be captured by ‘data with the arc of a lifetime’. Teacher education graduates with knowledge of local socio-economic and education contexts ‘... seek to use their knowledge to develop world-leading education by first ensuring that every child has the opportunity to the very best education’. Universities situated in areas of deprivation are particularly attuned to this systemic

imperative for widening participation, improving aspiration and employability, embracing diversity and challenging inequity to improve life chances, extending beyond mainstream settings into the third sector (e.g. working with refugees). Qualified teachers take universal themes prioritised by universities into their workplace settings, e.g. educating for global citizenship, environmental sustainability and digital literacy and citizenship. This is seen as the university's core work, where 'education of educators sits at the heart of the university'. Teacher education's contribution to this social justice agenda works in parallel with other public service disciplines such as health.

Critical and political engagement

International teacher education programmes and projects and international employment of alumni enhance the university's status and influence, extended by technology. Teacher education sustains 'an atmosphere of inquiry and inquiry-led practice', through collaboration, networking and partnership with trainee teachers and practitioners. Engagement with critical and political discourse in teacher education embodies the critical role of HE at the intersection of research, policy and practice. However, it is felt that a strong national and international reputation within the sector and sub-discipline may be independently sustained despite lack of acknowledgement and support from the university.

Examples of excellence

Beyond reiteration of generic contributions, there were specific examples of distinctive recognition, for example an award and international nomination for sustainability and a transferable model of Portfolio Based Learning adopted across disciplines. One respondent noted work with Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies on the expansion of work-based learning and professional accreditation, which was seen to shape the educational agenda. Some noted that education had outperformed other departments in the standard metrics or made a regional mark through community and partnership projects to improve employability and develop global citizenship. However, identifying examples of excellence proved difficult for many, who perceived themselves to be marginal or were unconcerned with strategy: they were unfamiliar with the strategic aims; it was not in their current remit; they were not the right person to ask; they were not at a high enough 'level' to comment. For two respondents, it was the marginalisation of the subject that nonplussed them, with one admitting:

I'm struggling with this question. I fear that, for all the reasons I have written about so far . . . this is a product of teacher education feeling/being separated from the university.

Another, from a non-English UK university, felt this discussion happened 'further up the tree':

I know what the rhetoric is that we are supposed to use or map our work to, but it's difficult to see what is real with a real impact. The tensions between the corporatisation moves, and the genuine work make it difficult for there to be any golden thread.

Summary of survey findings

This preliminary survey invited participation from teacher educators around the UK. Given the relative sizes of the nations involved, the participants and therefore the results, clearly reflect the challenges in England. Despite the different educational landscapes and devolved governmental responsibilities, the shadow of the Westminster approach to teacher education is cast over the rest of the UK. Evidence from the data demonstrates powerful contributions to HE agendas and strategic priorities, emphasising the breadth, depth, complexity and longitudinal reach of education through well-established relationships, partnerships and career paths. There is a strong regional focus with additional national and international influence. Contributions are understood from a resolutely strong subject perspective, acknowledging education's transformative power, but conviction and commitment are offset by a significant counter-current of reticence and lack of recognition, in relation to wider HE purposes and priorities. This is made explicit through tailing off, self-deprecation or decline: 'I'm not sure'; 'I'd have to think about this'; 'I don't think we say enough about this'; 'I am part time' or simply 'I don't know'. This suggests that teacher education's distinctive contribution to HE is not consistently prominent in its own professional and academic discourse, although there are clearly considerable variations in confidence and proactivity.

The findings have also left the research team with an uncomfortable question. Given the extent of the challenges articulated by our participants, and given the sheer number and complexity of micro events that they report, is the modern university the right home for meaningful teacher education after all? HE itself, at least in the UK, has undergone significant transformation since the Higher Education and Research Act of 2017, which fundamentally re-conceptualised learners as customers. As Stefan Collini (2016) has argued, when the Act was still at proposal stage, although higher education continues to operate within the vocabulary associated with traditional universities, its core concerns are now so different from what went before that we ought to stop thinking about the sector within the old framework. Despite this, there is enough evidence in the data to continue to argue for a continued strong university input into teacher education. Paradoxically, some of the metrics around employability and civic impact, which feel so alien to many of our academic colleagues, actually lend themselves well to describing the unique impact of teacher education. But there is also evidence that the personal cost to university-based teacher educators of operating within the current higher education context is very high. Perhaps the demise of the old teacher education college is a loss that has not been properly recognised and mourned in the national debate about education.

Conclusion

The experiences of teacher educators in England, and the UK, provides a cautionary tale for international teacher educators and those working in the wider academy around the globe.

Returning to the tale of two stories, our first conclusion is that the value and contribution of teacher education deserves to be promoted and celebrated within universities and the HE sector. Capturing the multi-faceted, reciprocal nature of activity and impact may require more effective use of data than already exists, to

combine internal and external metrics and gather additional qualitative and longitudinal information, the nature of which is understood to be continually subject to 'tinkering' and 'revision' (Povinelli, 2011). Paradoxically, many HE metrics (teaching excellence, retention, completion, employability) may be more attainable for teacher education and Education than for other disciplines, but a further level of understanding is required to press for recognition of alternative, more complex representations of achievement and value. This may involve departments and institutions 'deploying discourses' more coherently, creatively and strategically to draw together disparate and discrete elements of evidence (Barnett, 2008). The visibility of benefits and impacts may currently be predominantly locally and regionally focused, but there is also a responsibility on the part of universities, and the HE sector as a whole, in ensuring that teacher education is fully recognised, valued and utilised.

Our second conclusion is that universities need to understand teacher education as a collective endeavour. Zeichner (2006) argues, from the US perspective, that the move towards an 'all-university concept of teacher education' (p. 335) would be a way of enriching the activities of teacher education and would also bring stronger and more established academic voices into the debate. The responsibility for educating the next generation of teachers for the region would become the collective responsibility of the whole university. The idea of a truly academic and cross-disciplinary approach to teacher education is exciting but may feel a long way from the marginalised and frightened position in which many English colleagues currently find themselves. If this is the case, we are left with an existential choice, which Zeichner (2006) articulates starkly: vice chancellors and university presidents need to think about 'taking teacher education seriously as an important responsibility for higher education institutions or closing down these programmes.' (p.336).

Although our respondents expressed their perceived benefits to university in terms of the relational skills involved in leading and maintaining partnerships, in fact there is a strong case for using the existing metrics mechanisms to track what these benefits might be. In England this might include assertive involvement in routine accounting exercises; for example, the completion of the annual Higher Education Business and Community Interaction Survey (HE-BCIS). Our findings suggest that teacher educators may need to work actively with the strategic planning administrators to demonstrate the wider worth of the activities which feel like 'bread and butter' to them.

Thirdly, our survey showed that teacher educator perceptions and identities might sometimes be undermining to their academic self-confidence, restricting proactivity in engaging with the wider HE agenda and limiting self-promotion, reflecting an inherent crisis of professional identity (Barnett, 2008). Teacher education can tend to turn in on itself, expressing its value primarily on its own terms, in its own language. However, our evidence offers much within teacher education that universities can capitalise upon in order to build HE capacity: sophisticated knowledge of the regional ecology of education and the positioning of the university within it; long-standing relationships, partnerships and community engagement with commitment to social justice; research reciprocity with impact on professional practice; deep interconnected knowledge of pedagogy and andragogy in all phases and settings; and sophisticated understandings of how the values of inclusion, equity and sustainability can have local to global reach through education.

This research provides a cautionary tale that has implications far beyond England, where the policy push towards exclusively school-based teacher education continues at pace. The introduction of teaching-apprenticeships in 2017, leading to the DfE's subsequent commitment to offer level 5 apprenticeships, has removed the necessity of degree-level education from teacher education, further eroding the scope for higher education input into teacher education. Moves such as this allow governments to define what they mean by 'professional knowledge' and to sever the link between established epistemologies and the professions which draw on them. Indeed, as governments introduce tighter regulations on the content delivered with teacher education, 'teacher educators' work, and the curriculum they teach on will become more regulated, which strips teacher educators of their professionalism, and there is a danger of them becoming mere technicians rather than the professionals that they are' (Lofthouse & Turu Porcel, 2022). Whilst the findings from this initial stage of our research project contribute to the wider international debate about the damage these moves have made to teacher education and to schools, there may also be applications for universities themselves in the context of the pressure to defend their core purpose.

Note

1. We use the word 'neo-liberal' here cautiously. The use of metrics and accountability measures in the market place is well documented. Povinelli (2013) uses the term 'late liberal' and it is important to recognise that other forces are at work (see e.g. Davies & Gane, 2021).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [EH]. The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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