

# Reclaiming Initial Teacher Education in universities: Moving beyond a technician model

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## Abstract

Recent policy developments in England, particularly since 2021, have resulted in increased regulation and marketisation of Initial Teacher Training (ITT)/Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Although the origins of these developments go back much further than 2021, the current context in which ITE operates in England is, arguably, both challenging and unstable. Since 2010, the Government has increased the involvement of schools in ITE, creating an unstable climate for those who work in ITE in universities, through the School Direct initiative. School-Centred Initial teacher Training (SCITT) routes also precede this. The involvement of schools in ITE in England has extended to schools taking a leading role in the recruitment, selection and training of teachers and these developments have also, in some quarters, resulted in an anti-intellectual, anti-theoretical and anti-university discourse, which has been damaging to universities. This paper argues that current policy developments in ITE are reductionist and technicianist and makes a case for the role of universities in ITE.

## Keywords

Teacher education, social justice, higher education, teaching, pre-service teachers

## Introduction

The current ITE context in England is challenging. The increasing proliferation of ITE ‘providers’ that operate independently of the university sector has resulted in a competitive and marketised field which, arguably, sets England apart from the other nations of the United Kingdom (Mutton and Burn, 2024) and other countries globally. It has been argued that ITE in England is in a state of crisis

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(Ellis and Childs, 2023), not helped by policies which have been implemented in recent years (Mutton and Burn, 2024).

There has undoubtedly been a ‘practicum turn in teacher education’ (Mattsson et al., 2011: p. 17) and a discourse which positions university teacher education as the problem (Peiser et al., 2019). In 2010, Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, believed that ‘(t)eaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or woman’ (Gove, 2010). This led to a significant increase in the number of accredited School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) providers and School Direct provision (Mutton and Burn, 2024). SCITTs are accredited ITE providers and are therefore able to recruit and train their own teachers and award Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). School Direct provision, reflecting a variety of models, operated in partnership with universities. School Direct partners retained significant responsibility for recruiting and training teachers, although they were not accredited ITE providers and therefore the final recommendation for QTS was made by universities. The School Direct scheme has since been disbanded. However, the ‘practicum turn’ (Mattsson et al., 2011) is also evident through the growing number of teaching apprenticeship routes which are now available. Teaching apprenticeships for those with degrees were introduced in England in 2017 and the UK government plans to introduce degree apprenticeships in teaching in 2025 for those who need to gain a degree.

## Regulation

Some of the key policy developments in ITE in England can be traced back to the Carter Review of Initial Teacher Training (Carter, 2015), which made important recommendations regarding the content that ITE programmes should cover. ITE providers are required to ensure that the ITE curriculum addresses the Teachers’ Standards (Department for Education (DfE), 2011), the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) criteria (DfE, 2024a), the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF) (DfE, 2024b) and the current inspection framework by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) (Ofsted, 2020). Providers of teacher education must ensure that the ITTECF is the driver for course design and delivery. There is no freedom for university based ITE providers to deviate from any of these regulatory frameworks. Within the current context, ITE providers are required to ensure that new teachers are ‘classroom ready’ (Mutton and Burn 2024: p. 8) and able to metaphorically hit the ground running.

In 2021, the Government published its Market Review of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) (DfE, 2021). Once again, this signalled a move to increased government control of teacher training. The review recommended that all new and existing providers should pass a rigorous accreditation process to ensure compliance with the new ITT criteria (DfE, 2024a) and the ITTECF (DfE, 2024b) to ensure, ironically given the proliferation of training routes, consistency in provision. It has been argued that ‘This policy direction has, however, also had another dimension, driven by an ideological position that identifies the problem as being rooted specifically in the involvement of universities in teacher education’ (Mutton and Burn 2024: p.4). The accreditation process was implemented throughout 2022 and led to several long-established university providers of ITE losing their accreditation and withdrawing from the market. The accreditation process assumed that ITE was not sufficiently high quality to produce teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills and therefore this justified to the Government the increasing need for state control (Mutton and Burn, 2024).

## Reductionism

The ITTECF (DfE, 2024b) sets out the minimum content that ITE providers must address through their curricula. The content is broken down into a series of ‘learn that’ (theory) and ‘learn how’

(practice) statements. However, the binary between theory and practice is unhelpful (Mutton and Burn 2024) and artificial. Goodwin and Darity (2019) have emphasised that a collection of ‘how to’s’ (p.66) is insufficient to address the nuances and complexities of teaching. Furthermore, by focusing only on particularly milestones and expectations codified in the Teacher Standards, there risks a lack of holistic thinking and creativity (Byrne, 2022).

According to Bagley and Beach (2015):

The neo-liberal and neo-conservative critiques of the university-based system of teacher education as ineffective and over-theorised, coupled with the argument for a stronger practical skills-based ‘training’ can be perceived as a deliberate attempt to open up teacher education to market forces. (p.428)

The content of the ITTECF (DfE, 2024b) privileges specific pedagogical approaches, including an emphasis on explicit, direct instruction, retrieval, questioning, modelling and explanations. There is no emphasis on problem-based learning and experiential learning, and matters of social justice are inadequately addressed. This latter point is concerning, given that research demonstrates that teachers who cannot address adequately the needs of a diverse range of students are at risk of burnout (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2015). There is lack of emphasis on how to respond to increasing pupil diversity. In addition, specific research papers which have been approved by the Government aligning to the perspective of the DfE are privileged, and research which offers alternative perspectives to official pedagogical approaches is not listed.

## The role of universities in ITE

Strong theoretical underpinning in an ITE programme can support teachers to develop a strong teacher identity. Universities operate in spaces away from the hustle and bustle of schools. They occupy an ideal space in which to develop critically informed teachers, through research-informed teaching. Becoming a teacher is complex, messy and non-linear (McKay, 2013). A strong teacher identity, developed during university teacher education programmes, through engagement in research, can increase pre-service teachers’ capacities to respond to the professional challenges of teaching (Parsons et al., 2017). Teacher identity is not a stable entity but is continually reconstructed as a product of conflicting discourses and practices (Day et al., 2006a; 2006b, Sikes et al., 1985). It is ‘always deferred and in the process of becoming- [it is] never really, never yet, never absolutely there’ (MacLure, 2003: p.131). To be able to navigate conflicting policy discourses, new teachers need to develop a strong sense of the type of teacher they wish to be, have strong underpinning values and be able to reflect critically and deeply on their beliefs, attitudes and values (Goodwin and Darity, 2019). Universities provide ideal spaces for this type of thinking.

Universities provide liminal spaces for pre-service teachers as they move from one school context to another. Liminal spaces are ‘betwixt and between’ (Turner, 1974), characterised by movement, fluidity, flux and uncertainty. They provide safe spaces where pre-service teachers can question and ‘trouble’ hegemonic discourses and practices. Critical engagement with research enables pre-service teachers to interrogate contested ‘truths’ and ‘knowledge’ (UCET, 2020). Universities provide spaces which facilitate both critical interrogation of evidence and arguments, and opportunities to draw from a wide range of evidence to make informed decisions about pedagogy (UCET, 2020). They provide spaces where independent and critical thinking is encouraged and spaces where collective and deep reflection can result in transformative learning. Against the backdrop of deprofessionalisation, universities provide spaces which facilitate intellectual thought, academic debate and for rethinking education.

The UK Government should revise the current ITE curriculum framework (ITTECF) to include greater content on matters of social justice and enabling social mobility. Content on race equality, disability equality, sexuality and gender equalities should be included as mandatory curriculum content. Integrating short placements into course design which allow trainees to design social justice education in schools (e.g. designing a series of lessons in school that address racism) will support ITE partnerships to bridge theory and practice. These ideas are not new and have been explored in the works by Mills (2019) and on curricular justice with involvement of multiple stakeholders in and Gandolfi and Mills (2023) on teachers enabling social justice. Revising the ITE curriculum framework to embed critical thinking and analysis as key skills to be developed through university ITE programmes will support pre-service teachers to critically engage with research. Re-designing mentor development programmes to include additional emphasis on social justice and educational research will help to ensure that mentors are aware of the latest research findings so that they can better support pre-service teachers in schools to apply theory to practice.

Insights from European ITE contexts are also valuable. For example, Thompson et al. (2020) investigated teacher education in Finland and Denmark. They found that course design included significant emphasis on developing pre-service teachers' personal and interpersonal skills, alongside developing subject and pedagogical knowledge. There was a greater emphasis on group work and developing communities of practice and these aspects of course design enabled pre-service teachers to more effectively navigate challenges in schools.

School-led training routes in England are clearly advantageous in terms of facilitating opportunities for pre-service teachers to immediately observe aspects of practice that they have been learning about. Additionally, other routes into teaching may provide more opportunities for those who prefer a different mode of delivery away from the university type delivery and seek to diversify the teaching body. However, partnership models with universities ensure that new teachers are introduced to a variety of pedagogical approaches and the research evidence which underpins these. A combination of training within university and school-based contexts provide optimal conditions for teacher development. The challenge for universities is to ensure that teacher education is current, relevant and that it aligns with developments that are taking place in schools. The use of live streaming from the lecture hall into school classrooms is one approach which warrants further discussion and may be a solution to support universities in addressing the theory-practice divide that is often levelled at universities.

## Conclusion

This paper has outlined the move to a more school-led system of ITE in England and the increased government control of the sector. The increased proliferation of ITE providers and tighter regulation has resulted in the marketisation of teacher education and the deprofessionalisation of teacher educators. The regulation of the ITE curriculum, through the ITTECF and the accreditation process, reflects a policy discourse that privileges 'oven-ready' teachers who can implement specific pedagogical approaches, which are supported by government-endorsed research. We argue that pre-service teachers deserve better. They deserve to be supported to think critically and deeply about the type of teacher they wish to be. They deserve space for reflection. They deserve to be given opportunities to engage critically with a broad range of research evidence. They deserve an ITE curriculum which empowers them to address the challenges that they will undoubtedly experience during their careers. In addition, we argue that universities must continue to play an important and critical role in educating and training the next generation of teachers, as is the case in many other countries.

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