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Exploring academic and employer perceptions of quality and value in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for preparing student teachers

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Research Domain: Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

Abstract:

This working paper outlines the premise and rationale for a doctoral-level study, benchmarking Initial Teacher Education (ITE) quality across a selection of UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and school providers. Understanding the skills and qualities required in Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) is growing in importance, as routes to achieving Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) become increasingly diverse and the sector faces notable external challenges, including educational reform and policy changes including the new 2019 Ofsted framework. Through qualitative inquiry, this study will explore the standpoints of HE academics and school providers on the preparedness of NQTs and value in university ITE. Essentially, this study aims to uncover implications for improving new teacher quality, ensuring 'fit for purpose' and stronger understanding of employer expectations. This paper invites feedback and advice regarding the potential direction and focus of this forthcoming doctoral research.

Key words: Newly Qualified Teacher, Initial Teacher Education, school, secondary, employability

Paper:

Tomlinson (2012) characterises the pre-1980 UK HE system as facilitating a steady supply of highly skilled, educated and professional labour into the UK job market, addressing the workforce requirements of UK organisations. As earlier HE output was relatively low, graduates were in a privileged position within the job market, branded as the 'elite' (Williams & Flippakou, 2010), and represented a valuable source of human capital through their participation in HE (Bourdieu, 1996). Since the 1990s in particular however, the UK HE system has undergone expansion, or 'massification' (Storen & Aamodt, 2010; Wilton, 2011).

Therefore, it can be suggested that the increase in graduate 'supply' has overtaken the level of employer 'demand' in the graduate job market. Due to the increased number of graduates seeking

employment, job competitiveness has increased correspondingly, and the value of degree credentials has declined (Tomlinson, 2015) leading to questions being raised over the human capital potential of graduates. As a result, HEIs are under increasing pressure and scrutiny to evidence both quality and value in their provision.

These pressures are particularly pertinent in the context of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Due to increasingly varied routes into the secondary teaching profession, changing expectations of school providers and other sector specific influences, ensuring consistent and high-quality teacher education provision at HE level is becoming progressively complex. The primary purpose of this working paper is to explore these issues, with the aim of formulating the basis of a forthcoming doctoral study into quality improvement in Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs), guided by the following indicative research question:

To what extent do HE educators and school employers perceive value in university Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes for preparing student teachers?

Routes to becoming an NQT in England are becoming increasingly diverse (Gorard, 2017), with the option to qualify first through a BA/BSc/BEd/PGCE or undertake school employment leading to subsequent qualification (e.g., Teach First). The former route in particular receives significant HEI input in combination with a school-based placement. One of the key issues that arises from such a wide range of providers and routes is whether there are key differences in the type and quality of preparation that NQTs receive. During the first year of employment, if the routes into teaching prepare NQTs differently, this may have an impact in terms of teacher retention and success, and also on the lives of the students NQTs deal with during that initial year.

A further current development relating to secondary education would be the new 2019 Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) framework which will impact the processes through which schools are evaluated (Gov.uk, 2019). For example, outcomes will no longer be assessed through a standalone judgement, and the quality of learning and teaching (L&T) will also depend on the quality of the education and pedagogies driving it. In terms of the implications for NQTs, there will be a need to further emphasise curriculum design and development in university-level teacher training courses to align with these expectations. On this note, Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto (2009) emphasise that NQTs must possess a highly dynamic and flexible professional identity, aligning with the nature of the sector as they must be ready to positively engage in educational reform. Such contextual and policy-level influences are in combination with continuous changes in employer expectations of NQT, and the levels of support available for new teachers.

Recently, Lorencová et al. (2019) emphasised the growing requirement for NQTs to not only engage in the essentials of their role, but to also evidence high-levels of critical thinking. The authors argue that NQTs are responsible for promoting critical thinking in their students, whilst simultaneously evidencing these skills on a personal level for the purpose of enhancing their practice, reflections and evaluation in their role. Skill expectations in the form of collaborative classroom interactions are highlighted by Jolliffe and Snaith (2017), with claims that new teacher quality resides with the ability to confidently integrate cooperative learning into the classroom, through strategies such as roles in groups, jigsaw, and group investigations. As NQTs face growingly complex expectations in relation to their job-specific skills, coupled with the effects of external pressures in the sector, this raises query to the appropriateness of HE teacher education in supporting aspiring teachers to cope with this

turbulent environment. Further questions may also be posed regarding the quality of induction and mentoring for NQTs (Dymoke and Harrison, 2006). Smethem and Adey (2005) remind us that the first year of teaching can be extremely stressful, with new teachers struggling to fulfil the multiple demands of their role and experiencing 'culture shock', often unaided and unsupported by experienced colleagues.

In sum, this paper forms the rationale and basis for a forthcoming doctoral level study exploring these challenges for HEIs responsible for producing 'fit for purpose' NQTs. Through qualitative inquiry, this research project will capture the perspectives of both HE academics responsible for ITE and school providers employing NQTs. This choice of stakeholders reflects a gap in insights within the extant literature base, which tends to focus on perceptions and experiences of NQTs (Smethem and Adey, 2005; Dymoke and Harrison, 2006; Godard, 2017). The methodology will also comprise a reflexive account of the researcher's 14 year career as a secondary teacher and their observations of NQTs through supervising placements and delivering CPD.

In terms of the intended implications/contributions of this project, as HEIs are faced with shrinking provision due to the growth of new routes into teaching that are led by schools (Gorard, 2017), evidencing quality and value in university ITE programmes is becoming increasingly critical. Insights into school employer expectations of NQTs, and HE academic views on the value of ITE, serve to boost our understanding of how to effectively prepare NQTs for their role. As Davies et al. (2016) stress that individual teacher quality is central to school improvement and the achievement of policy objectives on 'raising standards', this topic is of importance in both theoretical and practical terms.

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