

How can the interests of university-led teacher education in England be further advanced within the current higher education policy context?

1 Aims and approach

1.1 Aims

This exploratory research and consultation exercise considers how the interests of university-led teacher education in England can be further advanced within the current higher education (HE) policy context – which, although buoyed by a global reputation and its significant contribution to the UK economy, is currently experiencing high levels of uncertainty and regulatory change.

The project has been commissioned by the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) and aims to explore:

- the nature and role of teacher education within a changing HE context
- benefits and challenges for teacher educators in encouraging and supporting advocacy approaches within their institutions
- the factors that contribute to effective partnership working to advance the interests of both teacher education and the wider HE environment.

It is intended that the findings be used to inform UCET's work in advocating for the critical role of universities in delivering and supporting high-quality teacher education and in raising the profile of teacher education as a critical issue within the HE policy agenda.

1.2 Approach

The project comprised the following key activities:

- a desk review of the existing research and policy environment surrounding teacher education within an HE context
- attendance at UCET's Annual Conference 2017 to hear from speakers and delegates in plenary and workshop sessions
- in-depth discussion with ten teacher educators, identified through their participation in the UCET Annual Conference 2017.

2 The current policy environment

The critical role of universities as direct providers of initial teacher education, and as facilitators of training offered through other routes, is widely recognised. For many universities, teacher education is a central part of their core provision¹ and is therefore of considerable value – both financially and reputationally – to the HE sector.

¹ Universities UK (2014). *The impact of initial teacher training reforms on English higher education institutions*. London: Universities UK.

Nonetheless, in recent years the challenges facing university providers of teacher education have been considerable. There are growing concerns about teacher supply due to consistent failures to meet recruitment targets² and high proportions of qualified teachers leaving the profession³. The expansion of school-led provision under the Coalition Government from 2010 onwards coupled with a short-term and uncertain approach to the allocation of ITE places⁴ has arguably caused concern about the long-term viability of university provision of teacher education.

Happily, the situation appears to have stabilised somewhat under the current administration – albeit with fresh uncertainty introduced by the recent appointment of a new Secretary of State for Education, which may signal further changes for the sector. UCET explain that ITE allocations for the academic year 2017/18 did not suggest an increasing shift towards ‘school-led’ routes⁵ and the 2016 White Paper, *Education Excellence Everywhere*⁶, makes proposals for a more sustainable operating context through, for example, the introduction of multi-year allocations and a strengthened QTS⁷. Nonetheless, challenges remain, not least how the sector must respond to the Framework of Core Content for ITT⁸, introduced following the recommendations of the Carter Review⁹ and which will form part of the quality criteria for awarding allocations used by the National Council for Teaching and Learning from September 2018 onwards.

Arguably, university-based providers of teacher education have some advantages in advancing their arguments for continued investment and development of the sector within the context of an HE environment that is buoyed by its global reputation and economic contribution. As Universities UK sets out:

*Our universities are a British success story: world-renowned, internationally competitive and a major economic asset, generating annual output of £73 billion for the British economy and contributing 2.8% of UK GDP. Universities generate over 750,000 jobs and around £11 billion of export earnings for the UK annually. Through research, teaching and other activities universities make a major contribution to society, to individuals and to social cohesion. This positive impact is felt by local communities in every region of the UK.*¹⁰

However, it is equally valid to suggest that situating matters of teacher education policy within this wider context is a precarious approach for two key reasons: firstly, it means

² House of Commons. (2017a). *Teacher recruitment and retention in England* (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, No. 7222, 12 June 2017). London: Houses of Parliament; House of Commons Education Committee. (2017). *Recruitment and retention of teachers* (Fifth Report of Session 2016-17) London: Houses of Parliament; National Audit Office. (2016). *Training new teachers* (HC 798). London: National Audit Office.

³ National Foundation for Educational Research. (2017). *Teacher Retention and Turnover Research*. Slough: NFER.

⁴ House of Commons. (2017b). *Initial teacher training in England* (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, No. 6710, 13 June 2017). London: Houses of Parliament.

⁵ UCET (2017). *The HEI sector in England and the implications of the current and emerging landscape for teacher education*. London: UCET.

⁶ Department for Education. (2016). *Educational Excellence Everywhere*. London: DfE.

⁷ Higher Education Policy Institute. (2017). *Whither Teacher Education and Training?* London: HEPI.

⁸ Munday, S. (2016). *A framework of core content for initial teacher training (ITT)*. London: Department for Education.

⁹ Carter, A. (2015). *Carter review of initial teacher training (ITT)*. London: Department for Education.

¹⁰ Universities UK (2017). *What should be the government's priorities for exit negotiations and policy development to maximise the contribution of British universities to a successful and global UK?* Available online: <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2017/government-brex-priorities-universities.pdf> [Accessed 13th October 2017]

that the capacity of institutions to influence teacher education policy will vary according to the relationship between HE and the political establishment at any given time; and secondly, the bandwidth available to engage in political debate about teacher education may at times be constrained by high levels of change affecting the sector more broadly. This second point is particularly relevant within the current political environment, within which the HE sector is experiencing high levels of uncertainty and regulatory change.

The nature and scale of change is exhaustive, extending to issues facing the UK as a whole as well as a range of sector-specific challenges. At the broadest level, HE institutions are advocating on multiple fronts in relation to the Brexit negotiations, most notably to address potential barriers to the inward and outward mobility of European and international staff and students (latest figures show that international and EU students contributed approximately £9.7 billion to the UK economy in 2011 through tuition fees and living expenditure), and to ensure ongoing access to European research and innovation funding and opportunities for international research collaboration (the UK is predicted to receive about £2 billion from the Horizon 2020 programme in its first two years¹¹).

On sector-specific issues, the introduction of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 represents one of the most comprehensive overhauls of the legislative context for HE in England in recent years, including measures such as: the Teaching Excellence Framework and associated ability to vary tuition fees despite concerns across the sector about the suitability of metrics used to make these assessments¹²; an increased emphasis on supporting new market entrants, setting the context for an increasingly competitive and consumer-led model of HE; and an extensive redesign of the architecture and funding environment¹³.

Under these conditions, it would undoubtedly be possible for important and longer-term policy considerations to be missed or viewed as secondary to concerns that are viewed (rightly or wrongly) as more immediate and pressing. To ensure that opportunities to advance the arguments for teacher education is not placed at risk as a consequence, it is therefore arguable that to further the interests of teacher education it is first necessary to position it as a core priority for the conduct of political affairs within universities themselves. Equally important to the question of how universities can support teacher education, then, is to understand how teacher education can be used to bolster and support the mission and purpose of universities today.

¹¹ House of Commons. (2016). *The impact of leaving the EU on higher education* (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, No. 7834, 13 December 2016). London: Houses of Parliament.

¹² House of Commons. (2017). *The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)* (House of Commons Library Briefing Paper, No. 07484, 22 June 2017).

¹³ Universities UK (2017). *Patterns and trends in in UK higher education in 2017*. London: UUK.

3 Key findings

3.1 The nature and role of teacher education within the HE policy context

Overall, participants reported that university-based teacher education is in a more stable position than has been experienced in recent years. In part, this was perceived to be the result of a more sympathetic outlook from the current government administration, leading to important changes supporting the medium- and long-term viability of teacher education programmes (e.g. the reintroduction of multi-year allocations and a commitment to strengthening Qualified Teacher Status). Teacher educators within universities have

also played an important direct role in consolidating their own positions, responding positively and proactively to changes in the wider environment – for example, participants reported that where universities have been open to new forms of training (e.g. Teach First, Troops to Teachers and School Direct), this has been beneficial to their core PGCE offer. A sustained commitment to collaborative working between universities was also identified as critical, with participants noting that this has been challenging in the context of increased marketisation and competition across the HE sector.

“Once upon a time, we were threading our way through government policy. Now we are threading our way through our own universities.”

“The more powerful the institution, the less influential the teacher education.”

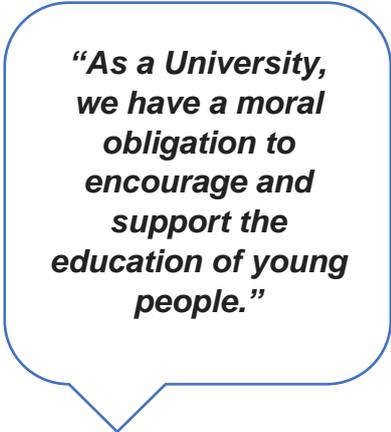
Nonetheless, participants had mixed views about the extent to which their institutions have been equipped to support them in advancing their position within the wider policy environment. In general, it was perceived that this was most effective in universities with strong historical links to teacher education, or where teacher education forms a central part of a university’s teaching offer. The situation was perceived to be more challenging in universities with a broader subject base, who arguably place less significance on teacher education as an indicator of

reputation and/or source of student income. This was felt to be compounded by the actions of successive government administrations, who have prioritised investment in subject areas commonly delivered by the research-intensive institutions (e.g. investment in the UK science base in support of the Industrial Strategy), thus acting as a disincentive to further investment and prioritisation of teacher education. Participants suggested that because such institutions have a strong voice amongst policymakers as a result of their strategic alignment to governmental priorities, this further narrowed the opportunities available to advance the interests of teacher education.

3.2 Benefits for universities in advocating for teacher education

Participants highlighted the following key benefits to universities of supporting and strengthening teacher education within their institutions:

- **A moral commitment to supporting education:** Participants reported that the educational purpose of universities is, in itself, reason to invest in teacher education as a means of supporting teaching and learning. In part, this appeared to be connected to participants' reflections about the existential role and function of a university, as well as more practical questions of effective supply chain management – with teacher education seen as a key route for investment in the next generation of students to participate in HE.
- **Engagement with communities and regions:** Many universities are experiencing an increasing need to redefine and build relationships with their local communities and regions (for example, through the growth of Local Enterprise Partnerships). Participants reported that teacher education is ideally placed to support this agenda, given their strong relationships with schools and ability to recruit according to regional teaching supply needs. While participants noted that teacher education should not be seen exclusively as a vehicle for widening participation, this is an important facet of their offer – both directly, in recruiting trainees from within the region, but also by acting as ambassadors for their universities within local schools and networks.
- **Experience of negotiating inter-departmental policy:** Since 2016, universities pursuing an advocacy agenda have found themselves in new territory negotiating with both the Department for Education (DfE) and Department for Business, Enterprise, Innovation and Skills (BEIS). This has necessarily required a change in stakeholder focus and approach. University-based teacher educators, by contrast, frequently have longstanding relationships with policymakers within DfE as a result of their close involvement in shaping and responding to school- and teaching-related public policy. Participants also reported that stakeholders within DfE may have very different perceptions of a university based on their teacher education practice than may be the case in other parts of government, providing universities with an opportunity to build on these reputational benefits in a wider context.



“As a University, we have a moral obligation to encourage and support the education of young people.”

3.3 Challenges for teacher education in encouraging and supporting advocacy approaches

The feedback from participants suggest that while there are many examples of good practice within universities of advocating to policymakers on behalf of their teacher education provision, there are three areas in which more could be done to encourage and support universities to maximise these opportunities. These are:

- **Building an understanding of the potential benefits of advocating for teacher education:** Participants perceived that teacher education can sometimes be less valued by their university colleagues than more research-

intensive disciplines. Some reported that teacher education is viewed as ‘just teaching’ and that university leaders ‘don’t understand what we are doing and why it is important’. A clear example of this was a perceived dislocation between research and practice within universities, with participants reporting that teacher education is often understood (particularly within research-intensive institutions) as a primarily practice-based discipline. As a result, participants felt that the potential benefits of building teacher education capacity can go unrecognised within universities – suggesting that as a result, opportunities to advocate for the interests of teacher education (and its significance to universities) are sometimes missed.

- **Growing the skills and networks required to advocate for teacher education:** In some instances, there was a perceived lack of understanding amongst university senior management about the wider context of teacher education, including, for example, how changes to schools policy may impact on teacher education provision within universities. Participants also reported that, until the recent movement of policy responsibility for HE to the DfE, university leadership teams were lacking in experience of dealing with government departments beyond BEIS. As a result, they did not have access to the skills or networks necessary to advance the wider arguments for teacher education within an HE context, or the opportunity to present a coherent argument for this to the same group of stakeholders. Some participants also reported that a lack of a sense of shared purpose and direction across the HE sector surrounding the direction of teacher education has created a risk that core messages required to encourage support investment in teacher education have become diluted.
- **Increasing motivation and confidence to advocate for teacher education:** Participants reported that the legacy of uncertainty surrounding the stability of university-led teacher education (including concerns about teacher supply and allocations (as detailed in section 2)) have created perception of volatility, which has made it difficult ‘to argue for a more sustainable approach’. As a result, participants reported that their university colleagues do not necessarily have confidence in the financial stability of teacher education over the longer term to enable them to advocate for it effectively. Similarly, because measures for determining the success of teacher education (e.g. Ofsted, and outcomes for schools) are different to other types of HE provision, this presents an additional risk and concern.

3.4 Factors contributing to effective partnership working between teacher educators and their colleagues to advance the interests of teacher education

Participants suggested that advocacy for teacher education within universities thrives under the following conditions:

- education is **valued as both a research- and practice-based discipline**, in particular when the pedagogical expertise of teacher educators is utilised more widely across the institution – this includes, for example, through the provision of training and support to colleagues working in other areas
- there is **regular and continual dialogue** between the senior management of universities and their teacher education colleagues – this may be through informal meetings and discussions, or more formally through representation of teacher educators in senior leadership positions within the University or participation in University-wide working groups and committees

- support for teacher education is **embedded within the university experience** – this includes a recognition of the working approaches expected of teacher educators (e.g. time spent in schools), as well as targeted support for trainees, recognising the distinct pressures of their chosen course of study.

Under these circumstances, it appears that the mutual benefits of advancing the interests of university-based teacher education and the wider HE context are better understood and supported.

3.5 Conclusions and recommendations

The research suggests that while there are many instances of good practice in teacher educators working closely with their university colleagues to advance the interests of their own provision, more can be done to help universities recognise the benefits of teacher in responding to the wider issues and challenges facing the HE sector. It is therefore recommended that:

- teacher educators continue to take a proactive approach to ensuring the support and buy-in of their senior management teams, by making them aware of the full range of benefits of encouraging and strengthening teacher education within universities
- teacher educators and their senior management teams work in partnership to understand the wider context of teacher education and develop arguments that will enable them to advocate effectively to policymakers
- explore ways to collaborate with other universities and partners to increase the impact of key messages affecting the sector, and to identify those messages on which to develop a shared message.

It is anticipated that UCET, with its wide membership and strong track record of successfully supporting and advancing the interests of the sector, would be ideally placed to work closely with teacher educators to support them in this mission.