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It's anarchy in England. Australia's ITE must now steer clear.

By Viv Ellis

The announcement of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (QITER) and publication of the expert group's [discussion paper](#) reminded some in the initial teacher education (ITE) and research communities of the continuing influence of England on Australian education policy as well as this country's own unique history of a [hundred and one damnations](#) in teacher education reform. The QITER discussion paper refers to English innovations such as [Now Teach](#) as well as to policy documents like the 2015 [Carter Review](#). And the QITER expert panel has met with their English equivalents, according to panel members at a recent Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) event.

Since that ACDE event, [the English panel](#), tasked with conducting a review of the 'ITE market', has published [its report](#). The panel proposes dismantling much of England's ITE infrastructure, forcing all providers to be reaccredited from scratch (to financially unviable criteria and unrealistic timelines); mandating 28 weeks' placement in schools in all 38-week postgraduate ITE courses; and requiring absolute compliance with a government-prescribed curriculum – the [Core Content Framework](#) – under threat of dis-accreditation through inspections by the government's schools inspectorate. Despite having demonstrated high quality ITE provision over at least the last ten years, [according to the government's own data](#), it is now possible for universities and school-based providers to fail inspections on the basis of what some of their staff believe and say in interviews with inspectors (there is no observation of training). Indeed, in the last few weeks, [courses have started to fail](#) because of what some people believe about teaching and programs have closed.

Unsurprisingly, these proposals shocked the sector and have led to unprecedented collective opposition: from all types of ITE provider (indeed, [the response from school-based trainers has been the strongest](#)), the UK [Chartered College of Teaching](#); [teacher unions](#); and individual professionals. Some high-profile universities like [Cambridge](#) have [intimated they will close their courses](#). In an [interview with Times Higher Education](#), Jo-Anne Baird, director of Oxford University's Department of Education, said 'I don't know any university that would be able to create a model that runs counter to the principles of academic freedom.' Even leaders of so-called 'Teaching School Hubs', likely to be principal of the proposals, have [expressed fury](#) at the government's response.

So, in these last few weeks, especially, I wasn't surprised that colleagues in Australia, noticing what they describe as 'similar voices' here, have asked me, as a relatively recent arrival in Melbourne from London, whether what is happening in the UK could happen here?

My answer has been 'no, at least not yet' and this is why.

First, England is not the UK. Historically, Scotland has always had greater independence in education and, since political devolution in 1999, Wales has been developing its own distinctive education system that is largely autonomous. So, my summary of the current state of ITE pertains to England only. We are not talking about comparisons with 'UK policy' but considering Australia (crucially, a federation) in relation to one out of the four UK jurisdictions. And what has gone on in England, as I will explain, makes it an international outlier – or aberration, depending on your point of view.

Since 2010, the school system in England has become increasingly 'academised' – meaning [the majority of secondary schools and increasingly large numbers of primary schools are either directly controlled by the education minister for England or controlled by that minister through an intermediary trust \(a 'multi-academy trust'\)](#). Local government has been marginalised to the extent that it now has few residual powers. England therefore has a highly centralised school system in terms of lines of accountability, schools are ultimately directly controlled by the education minister. These centralising, controlling policies come from a [different branch of British conservatism to the one that has historically emphasised small government](#).

This degree of tight control over a national school system is fundamental to understanding ITE reforms in England and what is possible in Australia. To create the conditions for the English situation to be replicated here, a new constitutional settlement between the states and the Commonwealth would be essential so that Mr Tudge and his successors directly control all Australian government schools.

Control over schools in England – cleverly presented by Conservatives as an opportunity for a 'school-led' system – is critically important in explaining is the situation in England because when the state controls school funding, the curriculum and assessment, teachers' professional standards, in-service professional development and qualifications, it is a comparatively small (if significant) step to then control how teachers are trained.

Secondly, the distinctive context for the English ITE Market Review' has been produced in part by the abolition of virtually all autonomous, non-governmental regulatory or deliberative bodies (known as 'QUANGOS') in education in England following the 2010 general election. Justified by austerity policies following the global financial crisis, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, the Training and Development Agency for Schools, the National College of Teaching and Leadership and others were all abolished by the education minister, [Michael Gove](#), alongside then special advisor, Dominic Cummings, an [architect of the Vote Leave \(Brexit\) campaign](#).

In the [Political Economy of Teacher Education \(PETE\)](#) project, my colleagues and I drew on the work of [Jennifer Wolch](#) to describe the abolition of these agencies as 'selective dismantling' of key institutions that provide democratic oversight and scrutiny. As we pointed out, such selective dismantling 'reduces opportunities for public deliberation and accountability while strengthening the decision-making powers of policymakers'. Governance structures, professional regulation and accreditation, curriculum and assessment policies, funding – are all now owned by the ministry – the Department for Education – right across England, with few exceptions. One exception is Ofsted (the schools inspectorate) that also inspects all ITE providers. However, in addition to being seen [less as an independent agency than a tool of enforcement](#) for party-political purposes, Ofsted has also been empowered to conduct 'research' that becomes an integral part of justifying policy. Concerns over the quality of Ofsted's 'research' reached a peak recently concerning its review of Mathematics teaching when [authors of several studies cited asked for the review to be withdrawn](#) over misappropriations of their research.

So, beyond a single national government school system controlled by the minister, for similar conditions for ITE reform to exist in Australia, all Commonwealth and state 'regulatory and deliberative bodies would have to be abolished – goodbye AITSL, ACARA, the teacher regulatory authorities, etc – and their powers redirected to the federal minister in Canberra.

Additionally, a national inspection agency would be needed, with right of entry to all government schools and all universities and powers of dis-accreditation. And finally, that inspection agency would have to be controlled by the federal minister and the agency led by a political appointee who, even if they didn't gain the [approval of parliament](#), as [would normally be expected](#), would [nonetheless be empowered by the minister](#).

In addition to these structural differences, the cultural, political and economic contexts for education in England have also developed along highly distinctive lines, something we identified in the PETE project as [a new political economy of teacher development](#). In 2016, [Verger, Fontdevila & Zancajo](#) characterised English education policy as 'privatisation as state reform' where 'public sector monopolies' had to be marketised to be made more efficient and radical policy interventions were justified by 'crisis frames'. In our [early work in the PETE project](#) we aligned ITE policy reforms in England with the loose coalition of interests known as [the GERM](#) – the Global Education Reform Movement. Under this analysis – and consistent with [Wolch's](#) research on outsourcing public services to the private sector – a market of new entrepreneurial, private providers would emerge that would challenge 'vested interest' legacy institutions such as universities.

Innovation would come through market disruption.

However, what has happened in England – or, at least, has become more obvious – is that successive governments have not primarily intended to create a market of any kind; there has been no genuine interest in new forms of enterprise and competition. Their intention has not been merely to create what [Wolch](#) called a 'shadow state' – an assemblage of multiple non-state providers functioning in a (quasi-) market 'administered outside of traditional democratic politics'.

Rather, for these Conservative governments, the 'market model', as Wendy Brown observed, is just familiar narrative cover for increasing state control.

Since 2010, reaching its apex in the recommendations of the latest report on ITE, England has experienced the heightening of the fundamental 'free market/strong state' [contradiction](#) in modern British conservatism where an absolute commitment to restoring/sustaining (often regressive) cultural traditions and traditional forms of authority has trumped free market principles and libertarian instincts and has done so in increasingly authoritarian ways.

Distinctively, too, English education ministers have relied on a very small number of individuals (a few teachers, current and former, often with [very limited classroom time](#), usually active on Twitter, and [one with unsuccessful experience as a night club bouncer](#); some [chief execs of those multi-academy trusts](#); and always, always [the same professor](#)) upon whom they have bestowed political patronage, a sub-set of whom have also been funded to compete with legacy providers like universities or traditional education entrepreneurs. In the PETE project, we characterised these types of organisations as 'co-created shadow state structures' as they arose out of the meeting of the needs of an authoritarian state with the entrepreneurial instincts of some of those in receipt of political patronage. In our analysis of one policy intervention in 2017, for example, we found one organisation had won the largest proportion of the available funding for teacher CPL despite the fact that it didn't exist at the time of the tender and had no track record.

Again, for similar conditions for ITE reform to exist in Australia, a different kind of conservatism would have to be dominant in policy-making, similar to the variety that has taken control of education in England. My limited experience of Australian politics suggests that while cultural restorationism and authoritarianism are not entirely absent from politics here, what tends to dominate are more classical liberal models that value ideals of small government, free markets and personal liberty.

That's not to say that traditionalism and authoritarianist instincts, in the way that [Poulantzas conceptualised them](#), do not have influence but they are not determining education policy in quite the comprehensive and urgent way that they are in England.

Finally and crucially, ITE providers in England – including, perhaps especially, the universities – lost the arguments about teacher education a long time ago, largely because they were not present in them.

The organisation representing universities involved in ITE in England went along with the general direction of reforms and only recently seems to have woken up to the fact that it is now 'do or die' for the sector.

Additionally, sector leaders in England, often in the research intensive universities, prioritised research performance and league tables and were prepared to proletarianise teacher educators (and I use that word technically) in pursuit of 'research excellence', as [Jane McNicholl and I showed](#). What has been missing in the years leading up to the current crisis in England are confident, non-defensive voices arguing the case both for genuine diversity of provision and innovation in ITE and for building strong research programmes in teacher education, just as would be the aspiration in any other area of research. Universities, especially, if they believed they had a strong contribution to make to ITE and that, as universities, that contribution was partly in the form of research and innovation, failed to make it happen in England.

In discussing what might happen in ITE in Australia, I have met a few people who have argued vigorously for a more 'joined-up' education system here. I have heard frustration that good ideas emerging from the Commonwealth government are not picked up by states and that children and young people do not always get the education they deserve. One or two have even said to me they wished Australia was following the example of England in both the direction, coherence and pace of reform. My response has been 'be careful of what you wish for'. Australia needs to aim a lot higher than England when looking for good ideas to influence innovation here. There are excellent examples of evidence-based interventions elsewhere in the world that can improve the quality of teaching. We need to look up, not down, we can't be complacent, and we shouldn't let the empire strike back.

Viv Ellis is Dean of the Faculty of Education at Monash University.

*Her latest book (with Lauren Gatti and Warwick Mansell), **The New Political Economy of Teacher Education: The Enterprise Narrative and the Shadow State**, will be published by Policy Press in 2022.*

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3 thoughts on "It's anarchy in England. Australia's ITE must now steer clear."

Augia Lian

August 9, 2021 at 10:08 am

28 weeks' placement in schools – I am aware that placements are important but the fact that ITE – also in Australia – places such a weight on placements indicates that practice, not reflection on practice, makes perfect. This is also reflected in our students' assignments. Instead of engaging in the units on placements, some of our students reproduce what they see in schools. They see it as state of the art, not as status quo. My current research – and maybe your own experiences with schools – indicate that once in schools, full time teachers do not have the time to do fundamental re-framing of their thinking, which innovation in fact involves. But, even my colleagues in Southeast Asia say that teaching is not just about techniques; one needs to integrate conceptual and, often, cultural shifts in our thinking. At the undergraduate level, there is no time for it and once in schools, there is absolutely no time for it. So where to from here?

Augia Lian
CDU

REPLY

Viv Ellis

August 9, 2021 at 6:42 pm

I agree. I think the point really Matters Practice Illustrates Deborah Britzman's classic ethnographic study Practice Makes Practice. And it makes education important to do well, improving mentoring in schools is important but it's expensive and time-consuming to do well, requiring a system-level funding commitment.

REPLY

Kevin Morris

August 9, 2021 at 7:01 pm

A great article that captures the politics over time
But we can't let the sector off
-no one (deans of Ed) as I recall challenged
Schools Direct
Growth of SCITTS
Teach First
Now Teach
Hibernia college
Abolition of TDA
ARK teacher training
institute of teaching
Ofsted framework for ITE
In fact many supported the disruptors for their own perceived career ambition and like Lady Macbeth will now fall on their own sword!
The sector remains weak politically and has no universal set of shared values.

REPLY

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