Overcoming the ‘culture shock’, breaking down barriers and creating institutional conditions to develop teacher educators’ research capacity

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The aims

In this session, we will explore the barriers facing colleagues to conduct research, and what kinds of institutional conditions are needed to develop teacher educators' research capacity in higher education. These institutional conditions need to be feasible with a clear recognition of external demands and pressure such as frequently changed ITE policies including the new Ofsted inspection framework.

In this session, colleagues will be invited to share their experiences of effective and ineffective interventions in their research journeys.

Some questions to be considered

1. What is the relationship between research and teacher education?
2. Is it possible to be an effective teacher educator without being a researcher?
3. What kinds of research are most relevant and beneficial to teacher education?
4. Would it be possible that spending more time to develop research (and publications) could potentially undermine the quality of teaching?
5. **What research support have you found most helpful and what has been least helpful?**

The context

Teacher educators in higher education are often encouraged to engage with research to enhance their own subject knowledge and professional practice, improve teacher education programs, and contribute to educating better trainee teachers. This trend is partly driven by the belief that a research-based or research-informed practice ultimately improves the quality of teacher education in general.

Tatto and Furlong (2015, p.146) argued that ‘as part of the political drive to improve the quality of teaching and learning, education policy-makers across the UK have sought to stimulate more evidence-informed approaches to educational policy and professional practice’.

The ‘culture shock’

There could be a ‘culture shock’ for some teacher educators to conduct research when they have just moved from a school working environment to a higher education setting.

Nixon et al. (2000) suggest that teacher educators could feel vulnerable when they have just moved to a higher education working environment.

> The majority of this occupational group will already have pursued a career as teachers in schools, so come to their second career with a very different set of expectations and achievements than many of their academic colleagues. This is particularly crucial given the current premium placed on academic publications, since most initial teacher educators are unlikely to have begun to publish seriously prior to gaining a university post (p.244).

Research also shows that there are a number of barriers for teacher educators to engage with research.

For instance, Nicholson and Lander (2020) have identified the barriers including a lack of time, insufficient mentoring, limited opportunities for research collaboration, the nature of initial teacher education (ITE) and negative feelings towards research.

What research support have you found **most** helpful and what has been **least** helpful in your research journey?



Our experiences of research capacity building

In our experiences of working with teacher educators, we have found the following approaches helpful in research capacity building.

1. Research skills training

Research capacity begins with access to structured training in research methodologies, design, ethics, and academic writing.

Our experience suggests that both short-term professional development courses and formal postgraduate study (e.g. Master’s and doctoral programs) can significantly enhance the research competencies of teacher educators.

2. Research mentoring & collaborative research

Research mentorship can have many benefits and is a cornerstone of effective research capacity building.

In parallel, collaborative research projects offer opportunities for shared learning and interdisciplinary inquiry. These collaborative efforts foster collegiality, diversify perspectives, and often lead to higher-quality research outcomes.

Our experiences suggest that institutional structures supporting research mentorship and collaboration are key to developing confident and capable researchers within teacher education.

3. Internal funding for research activities

Access to internal funding can be crucial for enabling teacher educators to engage in empirical research.

Internal funding also signals institutional support for research engagement, which can motivate greater participation and innovation among teacher educators.

4. Support for academic writing and publication

Academic writing and publication often pose significant challenges for teacher educators. Hardy et al. (2022, p.163) suggest that 'Becoming an academic, after a career as a teacher, can be a challenge. A key aspect of this transition is writing and publishing and maintaining the writing habit'.

Our experience highlights the importance of providing institutional support through writing groups, peer feedback forums, writing retreats, and editorial mentoring.

5. Recognition of research as part of workload

One of the most consistent barriers to research engagement among teacher educators is the lack of dedicated time for research activities.

It is important that institutions formally recognise research as a legitimate component of academic work, integrated into workload models and performance review systems.

6. Cultivating a research culture to value practitioner research

An institutional culture that values inquiry, reflection, and scholarly engagement is foundational to sustainable research capacity.

This includes promoting practitioner research, which enables educators to investigate and improve their own teaching practices.

Institutional leaders play a critical role in fostering this environment by setting expectations, allocating resources, and promoting a shared vision of research as integral to teacher education and of teaching and research as connected practices (Light, Cox and Calkins, 2009).

Final thoughts

Developing teacher educators' research capacity demands a new institutional epistemology and a new way of knowing.

Building research capacity among teacher educators is a challenging yet vital endeavour.

Developing research capacity among teacher educators is central to educating a new generation of teaching professionals who are ‘competent and confident professionals; epistemic agents; able to engage in enquiry-rich practice; and responsible professionals’ (UCET, 2020).

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