

Initial Teacher Education in peril

Why the market review is about anything but ‘world-class training’

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Abstract

The Initial Teacher Training Market Review was released at the end of the most tumultuous of academic years. In spite of a claim to offer the promise of ‘world-class training’, the proposals, if enacted, have the potential to force out many with genuine expertise in teacher education. Written during the seven-week review consultation period, this article questions the recommendations of the document and the motivation behind what has been proposed. A range of possible implications are explored, and questions are posed about the review process itself.

Keywords: Initial Teacher Education, Initial Teacher Training Market Review, marketisation, teacher supply

Background

On 5 July this year, the DfE released their Initial teacher training Market Review Report (MRR). Bearing seismic implications for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), SCITTS (School Centred Initial Teacher Training settings), schools, student teachers and of course children, the report’s proposals have been met with scrutiny and frustration in equal measure. This dispiriting review proposes, on the basis of poor evidence, a swift dismantling of the existing teacher education ‘market’ to make way for an untested and seemingly ideologically- driven alternative. A particularly stark indication of the MRR’s capacity to undermine the status and profile of teaching as a profession can be found in results of a University Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) survey which found that 35 out of 40 universities offering initial teacher education felt that, were the proposals to be enacted, they would be forced to consider withdrawing from the market. The conclusion that the proposals are designed to finally sweep away opposition to the ‘reforms’ to teacher education, started by Michael Gove and advanced with relish by Nick Gibb, is difficult to avoid.

Headline proposals

Contained in the 56 pages of the MRR are many specific recommendations, summarised as follows:

- All providers will have to apply for re-accreditation against a new criterion, with successful applicants to be announced by the end of the 2021/22 academic year. Trainees already recruited by providers who are unsuccessful in their bids or which decide not to go for re-accreditation, to be brokered out to other providers
- Reforms to teacher education and development to be based on the new ITT Core Content framework (CCF) and Early Career framework (ECF) (2019) and the six new National Professional Qualification (NPQ) frameworks (2020.)
- More prescriptive requirements for all school mentors, with implications for time and workload. A prominent role for lead mentors, tied in with the introduction of the national professional qualification in leading teacher development (NPQLTD).
- A significant role for the not-yet-established Institute for Teaching; an increased role for the Teaching School Hubs; and more frequent Ofsted inspection
- Changes to the structure of courses to incorporate four-weeks' worth of intensive group placement

What does the DfE say they want these proposals will achieve? In their overview of the report, three central aims are listed:

- all trainees receive high-quality training
- the ITT market maintains the capacity to deliver enough trainees and is accessible to candidates
- the ITT system benefits all schools

These are ostensibly desirable and non-controversial objectives which surely no one with an interest in education could dispute. However, what is perhaps most baffling and also galling about the MRR is the lack of any plausible attempt to provide links between the extreme measures proposed and the aims of the review. This lack of transparency combined with an understanding of where these 'reforms' fit within the DfE's project to control every stage of teacher education, prompt the inescapable conclusion that the proposals are ideological in nature.

A need for reform?

The proposed implementation period is dizzyingly short, particularly set against a backdrop of increased pressure brought about by the pandemic. Applications for re-accreditation are due to open in November this year, be considered in early 2021 and the successful providers announced by the end of the 2021-22 academic year. This schedule is problematic for a number of reasons. For instance, PGCE courses would need to be re-written and approved by a range of parties. Schools would need to very quickly consider whether they can meet the increased demands on time and staffing, while potentially

losing the flexibility to balance their level of involvement year on year according to their own capacity. The requirement for the intensive placements represents a new and potentially burdensome demand on schools and will likely impinge on the amount of time available to taught programmes. Apart from anything else, responding effectively to a consultation is surely made more difficult by the complete absence of an explanation of how these requirements will be funded.

Although the proposed timeframe implies a high level of urgency, there is much that suggests otherwise. Whilst there is always room to improve and innovate, there is no clear evidence of a pressing need to address the quality of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). A statement from the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for the Teaching Profession's own report on the state of teacher education, released just weeks before the MRR, reflected the fact that that in the year proceeding the launch of the review (on 2 January, 2021) all teacher education partnerships inspected by Ofsted were graded either 'Good' or Outstanding'. This was just one aspect of the APPG's case for the following unambiguous statement:

Given that the premise for the Market Review is flawed and that it presents an existential threat to teacher supply in the short term, and teacher quality in the long term, we recommend that the government immediately halts the review of the ITT market. (APPG, 2021, p20)

While we can hope otherwise, experience would suggest that the DfE is likely to be unmoved by this recommendation. There is clearly a very high degree of determination to push through the final stage in their tripartite vision for teacher 'training' embodied by the CCF, the ECF and the six new NPQs. There is a danger that very recent findings by Ofsted might be used to dismiss objections and accelerate change.

Destabilising forces

Since the launch of the market review there has been a significant shifting of the goalposts in terms of what is considered 'high-quality training'. Against the backdrop of the additional pressures of the pandemic, the un-piloted CCF has become statutory and providers have had to quickly restructure their programmes to encompass this imposed curriculum. The (also new) ITE Inspection Framework sets successful integration of the CCF as its principal measure of quality and in spite of assurances from Ofsted of a transition period to allow providers to embed the CCF, a number of providers previously graded 'good' or better have been downgraded, some to 'inadequate'. Terry Russell and Julie Price Grimshaw (2021) offer a revealing critique of what transpired during the first wave of inspections under the new framework, highlighting the unfairness of what occurred and the demoralising effect on those involved.

There are some pressing issues in ITE that need attention, but these could surely

be addressed through genuine sector-wide consultation rather than a costly, time-consuming and destructive re-accreditation process. For example, part of the rationale for the review is a perceived need to bring clarity, and ‘to maximise the opportunity to ensure the market’s navigability for trainees.’ (2021, p10). Now, setting aside the inherent irony that much of this confusion is due to previous tinkering by Michael Gove and Nick Gibb, it is true that there are many routes into teaching, and this can be confusing for prospective student teachers. However, there are good arguments for retaining the benefits of choice. Access to ITE locally brings diversity to the profession, allowing for widened participation, facilitated by things like reduced travel costs and journey times to placement and ITE centres. For every small provider that is lost at re-accreditation others will be scooped up and assimilated into the jurisdiction of the new Institute of Teaching. This in itself signals another aspect of these ill-conceived ‘reforms’. The tendering process for the Institute of Teaching contract is still in progress. This renders very low the likelihood of its being ready to take a central role in teacher education within the timeframe proposed in the review report.

Quality and evidence

The review makes numerous mentions of the importance of ‘evidence-based training’. Again, so far, so uncontroversial, except that what is being required here appears not to be critical engagement with a range of the best available research. If it were, then why would many HEIs have identified the review as a threat to their academic integrity and autonomy? No, the problem is the view being advanced in the review report, as well as in the CCF and ECF, that some evidence is incontrovertible and not to be critically evaluated. A clear example of this relates to the on-going argument for the primacy of Systematic Synthetic Phonics in the teaching of reading. Point 28 of the review report provides a direct instruction that, ‘time is not used teaching [course-participants] alternative approaches’ (p13). As the National Association for Primary Education (2021) have explained in their response to the review, it is one thing to teach about the importance of phonemic awareness and phonetic decoding in the development of reading, but quite another to suppress engagement with the wealth of evidence that shows other approaches are both necessary and beneficial.

Turning a blind eye to the nuance, complexity and range of available evidence is fundamentally at odds with the academic values associated with university-led teacher education and wholly unhelpful for teacher development. Yet this government’s approach to educational research is so selective as to create the illusion that what teachers need to know can be distilled into a fairly short list of universally applicable truths about teaching and learning. As if to place the veracity of their evidence base beyond question and quell any dissenting voices, the MRR notes that both the CCF and

the ECF have been independently assessed and endorsed by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). Terry Wrigley (2018) provides a powerful analysis of the limitations of the EEF'S Randomised Control Trial (RCT) methodology and the necessity for criticality in the face of the seductive promise of the knowledge of 'what works'. Whilst findings of the EEF are held in high estimation by the DfE, they can only ever provide part of the picture, and may not give due recognition to the messiness of learning.

The model of teacher education proposed by the MRR, the CCF and the ECF is so prescriptive and limited that we may be left with new teachers, ill-prepared for the difficulties and challenges of the role. A fundamental disrespect for the profession is indicated. Many commentators, including Lord Jim Knight (2021), see this report as rooted in a belief that teachers are technicians rather than professionals. Certainly, the language of the report connotes this view; consider first the implications of the word 'training' rather than 'education'.

Another aspect of the review report that equates quality with uniformity is the proposed requirement that 'in-school experiences are seamlessly coherent with the training curriculum' (p4). This seems both unrealistic in terms of the restrictions it would place on placement schools and undesirable in terms of lost opportunities for students to experience creative pedagogies and a range of contexts for learning.

Consulting in good faith?

The extraordinary conclusion that the purported aims of the review can only be achieved through sector-wide re-accreditation really does undermine any notion that the consultation is being carried out in good faith. Is Nick Gibb really willing to sacrifice diversity of experience and expertise as well as partnerships built over many years of thoughtful collaboration, simply to demand things are done his way?

Offering a derisory seven weeks to assess and respond to the proposals, the consultation period is half that of the minimum timescale recommended by the Government's Code of Practice (Gov.uk, 2008). By corresponding with the school holidays, it fails to give due consideration to the capacity of certain interested parties to engage (Gov.uk, 2018).

On 21 July, the Chartered College of Teaching hosted a DfE Q&A webinar on the review. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was very well attended and attracted many questions from interested parties. The response to most questions from Ruth Talbot, representing the DfE, was that concerns should be explained through detailed response to the consultation document. The message that the DfE are listening and that they will genuinely engage with the consultation process felt hollow however, knowing that opportunities to listen have already been missed. As early as January 2021, UCET were expressing deep concern about the direction of the review; concerns which have in fact been born out on publication

of the final document. Yes, many informed voices will respond to the consultation but instead of providing the freedom to genuinely collaborate in and contribute to a discussion about teacher education, responses will be shaped by the narrow agenda advanced in the review. More thought should also have been given to the fact that many involved in education are on their knees after more than a year of making things work for children in the most challenging of circumstances. How many, I wonder, have time or energy to read and respond to the proposal during their much-needed summer break, and what affect will this have when it comes to the analysis of responses?

Concluding observations

By reducing teacher education to ‘training’ and sacrificing criticality to the false and a dangerous promise of expediency and uniformity, these proposals and their accompanying policies could do so much harm. At present, expert teacher educators collaborate successfully with schools to develop confident, creative, thinking teachers, who are able to evaluate evidence and to research their own practice. While knowing ‘what works’ can be helpful, surely we also need beginner teachers to routinely ask:

- Does it work?
- Why does/doesn’t it work?
- How could I adapt this approach to make it work?
- What else might work?

Unquestioning acceptance that certain ways of doing things are universally transferrable may leave teachers unprepared for the reality of local context and for the complexity of supporting individual children. There are all kinds of reasons why teaching and learning happens differently in different schools and there is much to be learnt from experiencing this diversity and understanding the accompanying pedagogies. Sadly though, there is a real danger that many excellent schools, particularly those with innovative practice and a creative approach, will be unable or unwilling to meet the lab-like conditions proposed in the MRR and its requirement that ‘that trainees’ experiences on placement are fully aligned with the training curriculum’ (p4).

Many involved in teacher education nervously await the findings of the consultation and dread a response from the DfE that could render their roles untenable. However, Ian Bauckham, chair of the ITT Market Review Expert Advisory Group (EAG) would have us believe that the changes proposed are far from incendiary; rather they are both necessary and manageable and that those who oppose them are at best getting their knickers in a twist and at worst enemies of progress (Bauckham, 2021). Perhaps it seems flippant to use that phrase, but the tone of Bauckham’s comments renders it hard not to feel patronised.

At the time of writing, the only other member of the EAG to have publicly commented on the review is Professor Sam Twistleton, who within days of the release of the MRR warned that the proposals could be detrimental to the quality and supply of new teachers. Whilst not suggesting any specific proposals be withdrawn, she did identify problems with the proposed timeframe for change (Whittaker, 2021).

The contrasting statements from these two members of the EAG give rise to questions about the role played by the group in informing the proposals. We might ask:

- Which perspectives were carried forward and which expert knowledge was considered relevant?
- Who wrote the report?
- Instead of a genuine sector-wide discussion, why is deemed acceptable for the future of ITE in England to be defined by so few contributors with only the flimsy safety net of a shaped consultation?

In a field that is so ‘marketised’, it is surely also relevant to consider the possible motivations and biases of the various members of the EAG. That is not to suggest that any member is without expertise, or to imply that they shouldn’t have a voice in a genuine consultation. It is to point out that it would be useful to know on what basis this particular group was selected and what might have been reasonably expected in terms of objectivity. It is at least notable that review was chaired by Ian Bauckham, who holds a number of high-profile roles, including Chair of Ofqual; Chair of the Project Board Oak National Academy; and CEO of a Multi Academy Trust which runs its own SCITT. These things might suggest an inherent sympathy for the government’s prevailing beliefs about teaching and learning.

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