

Measuring the Quality of Initial Teacher Education Partnership in Scotland

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Across the globe Initial Teacher Education (ITE) is often conceived as a solution to the policy problems of education (Mutton, Burn, & Menter, 2017). Its presence in the minds of policy makers and analysts at all levels stems from the belief that improving the quality of beginning teachers has a cumulative effect throughout the profession in subsequent years. Accordingly, much has been made of the need to measure the quality of ITE so that uplifts in areas such as student outcomes might occur. National Governments and international organisations, such as the OECD, cite ITE as a vital part of the education jigsaw. The Measuring the Quality of Initial Teacher Education (MQuITE) project is a pan-Scottish endeavour that seeks to identify ways in which the quality of ITE might be measured both during and immediately after initial preparation and how this initial work supports the development of excellent teachers in their first five years of teaching. The project started in 2017 and is due to run for 6 years in total. Funded by the Scottish Government, it is a collaborative effort between all eleven Higher Education Institutions who offer ITE across Scotland and the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). Although in Scotland, ITE is only offered through HEIs, it is hoped that the framework will support developments in other jurisdictions. The overall aim for the research is to develop, collaboratively, a framework for assessing ITE quality and to use it as part of a five-year cohort study. There are two research questions for the study:

1. How can quality in ITE be measured in a Scottish, context appropriate way?
2. What does this measuring tell us about aspects of quality in different ITE routes in Scotland?

Following a thematic literature review, and the work of Feuer et al., (2013), the project utilises an innovative eight-fold framework to identify various elements of ITE as they impinge on the quality of provision. Part of this involves surveying students at the end of their time in their ITE programme and again at the end of every subsequent year of teaching. In addition, teacher mentors (school staff responsible for students whilst on practicum) and higher education staff have also been surveyed for their views on ITE.

One of the areas for study is partnership. Following on from the Donaldson Report (Scottish Government, 2011) part of whose remit was to contribute to building stronger partnerships, ITE was conceived as needing new kinds of: ‘collaborative partnership within which all aspects of the student’s development are a shared responsibility and respective roles and responsibilities are clear’ (p.7). This was seen as a challenge to traditional modes of working which identified that, most partnerships between teacher education institutions and schools are based on traditional, hierarchical relationships between partners, vertical lines of ‘collaboration’ and stable ideas of knowledge transfer. In such one-way relations, one partner is normally expected to ‘add value’, and in teacher education partnerships, this has typically been the university. (LilleJord & Børte, 2016: 551).

To this end, partnership, often seen as a ‘buzzword’ (Jones et al., 2016), was investigated as part of the ITE experience. This paper considers: partnership as a theoretical issue; and, the ways in which teacher mentors and university staff judge partnership and its effects. It presents the results of the Scotland-wide survey with these two groups from a thematic analysis of qualitative data and descriptive statistical analysis of quantitative data. In particular the paper discusses two elements: differing views on partnership between the two groups and views on further training and education about ITE.

Method

Ethical clearance was given for this research by the University of Edinburgh on behalf of all the Institutes of Higher Education in Scotland who support the initial education of teachers. Teacher mentors (response n=229) and university staff (response n=150) were surveyed using Bristol Online Surveys. Quantitative data were gathered through the use of Likert style questions, and qualitative data were gathered through free form entries on the survey. The questions specifically asked respondents for their views on partnership concerning the schools and universities within which they work and their views on future training and development needs. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS and qualitative data using NVIVO. Quantitative data analysis mainly used descriptive statistics and a thematic analysis was undertaken with the free-form answers. Questions ranged from those about the number of institutions with which individuals worked to feelings about the quality of the partnership provision. Respondents were also surveyed about their desires for further training and development in this area. Results for the survey show some correlation between university and school staff on certain areas of partnership work and training, but a larger number of disagreements between the two cohorts. In particular, both sets of respondents displayed some ambivalence towards the quality of partnership across Scotland, whilst the need for training was seen to be different between the two groups. The mechanisms for organising student practicum were seen to be helpful overall, and site-based study (practicum) was viewed as very important by both sets of respondents. Whilst a great deal of confidence and competence in supporting students whilst on placement or other areas of their ITE experience was felt by both sides, the amount of training, development and learning in these areas by both cohorts was limited. In summary, the differences between university staff and school-based staff are notable, but in many instances there is a great deal of agreement.

Expected Outcomes

The literature demonstrates the complexities in designing and operationalising partnership working between HEIs and schools; this is no different in Scotland. Traditional methods exacerbated power differentials between partners, whereas contemporary partnerships seem to centre more on collaboration. This still brings its challenges however. Moreover, the literature highlights the ways in which the 'third space' concept can be utilised for understanding and actioning partnerships. The survey shows that there is much to commend in ITE partnership work across Scotland. In no small part, this is possibly due to the fact that the Donaldson Report (Scottish Government, 2011) locates every teacher as a teacher educator. In no small way has this begun to orient the activities of all who work with ITE students and beginning teachers. Where there is agreement, further work can be done to strengthen the outcomes of ITE. Where there is disagreement, further research needs to be undertaken. Specifically, questions need to be asked as to the nature of partnership in the minds of school and university staff. The wide disagreements in this area suggest that differing conceptualisations of partnership might be at play or that power differentials operate. Similarly, the desire, or lack of desire, for further training is a notable difference between the two cohorts. Questions also need to be asked about the structure of placements, as many staff work across institutions and thus deal with differing expectations, documentation and organisation. As a baseline survey these surveys raise important points about the ways in which HEIs and schools work together to promote ITE. However, for the Scottish context they also demonstrate the need for further research to determine the quality of ITE across the country. This resonates across countries as partnership is not only a Scottish matter.

References

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