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## **Initial Teacher Education in England and the Covid-19 pandemic: Challenges and opportunities**

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# **Initial Teacher Education in England and the Covid-19 pandemic: Challenges and opportunities**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the impact and implications on initial teacher education (ITE) of the crisis brought about by the Covid-19 lockdown of schools and universities from the perspectives of four university providers in England. The start of the pandemic meant that, in England, schools were closed to all but vulnerable pupils and the children of 'key workers', and so the normal placements of students in teacher education (ITE students) could not continue. The 'virtualisation' of the ITE programmes by, in some cases, both schools and universities, raised significant issues of both equity and pedagogy. The loss of time on school placement had the effect of lost opportunities for practising teaching but increasing the time for reading and reflection. We consider the effects on a teacher education programme when the practicum experience is abruptly curtailed, yet the programme is able to continue in a different way. We present a model framework for a new digital pedagogy for ITE and discuss the opportunities and affordances available as the post-Covid educational landscape emerges, and suggest that the Covid-19 crisis provides an opportunity to reflect on the idea that practicum experience may be a necessary but not, in itself, a sufficient condition for teacher learning.

**Keywords:** teacher education, post-covid-19, digital pedagogy, knowledge enhancement framework

## **Introduction**

Although the initial teacher education (ITE) community in England is used to a rapid rate of change, that occasioned by the Covid-19 crisis in education has forced exceptionally swift adaptations, the consequences of which will take time to become fully apparent, but will potentially have consequences lasting well into the current decade. The 2019-20 cohort of teacher trainees in England has had a uniquely different experience during their ITE programmes which has raised fundamental questions about not only the theoretical but also the practical basis of what it is to learn to teach in England.

In the UK, governmental responsibility for education, including the initial education of teachers, is devolved to the jurisdictions of the constituent countries: Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the Westminster government (and, in particular, the Department for Education, henceforth DfE) having oversight for ITE in England. The reforms set out in the Westminster government's White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010) had effect solely on the education system in England. Thus, teacher education in England has, for the last decade, been subjected to a continuous churn of policy brought about by a succession of governments that have made it the crux of their efforts to reform education and *inter alia* the education and training of teachers (la Velle and Reynolds 2020). Although an almost bewildering number of mostly school-based routes to qualifying as a teacher have opened up (Whiting et al. 2016) marking England as an outlier in the UK and internationally, courses provided by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) still provide a significant route for achieving QTS (qualified teacher status) (DfE 2019). Most of these consist of a one-year postgraduate route resulting in the award of a PGCE (postgraduate certificate of education) or PGDE (postgraduate diploma in education and leadership) with QTS,

although there are some undergraduate routes to a first degree with QTS. Thus, in England, there were 29,580 new entrants to postgraduate initial teacher training (ITT) courses in the academic year 2019-20, and 4,963 new entrants to undergraduate ITT courses (DfE 2019). Of these, provisional figures about postgraduate new entrants to ITT indicate that 45% are on an HEI-led route, 27% are on a School Direct route, 13% are on a School-Centred ITT (SCITT) route, and 8% and 6% respectively are on a School Direct or Teach First route (DfE 2019).

In contrast to the situation facing some of those participating in many school-led teacher training courses, university-led teacher education programmes, or other routes which have the involvement of universities in offering, for example, PGCEs, put an emphasis on teaching as an autonomous, intellectual activity (Duggan and la Velle 2019, 108) and most postgraduate routes carry master's degree credits. One implication of this is that any description of ITT as being *either* 'HEI-led' *or* 'school-led' grossly simplifies a complex reality (Whiting 2019, 48). We accordingly adopt these terms with this caveat in mind, recognising that, as will be made clear, 'university-led' can also incorporate 'university-involved'. One of the distinguishing features of a university is that as well as offering tertiary level programmes and degree awards, it also pushes forward the frontiers of knowledge through its research endeavours. In England (as in the rest of the UK), the quality of a university's research is assessed on a 5-6 yearly cycle. Currently, this is through the Research Excellence Framework (REF) which was, until the onset of the pandemic, due to be held in 2021. The outcomes of the REF for English universities determine the amount of public funding made available to each institution from Research England, the council set up in 2018 to administer research and knowledge exchange. In addition to this, teacher education programmes offered by universities are subject to rigorous scrutiny by what is effectively the government's

inspection service, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OfSTED). Teacher education provision is inspected approximately every 3 years. OfSTED inspectors report on the overall effectiveness of the partnership between the university and its partner schools taking account of the quality of education and training, and the leadership and management of the partnership (OfSTED 2020). Grades are awarded and these, together with the report are published.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in England in the early Spring of 2020 was sudden and dramatic. By the third week in March, businesses, schools and universities had effectively closed; most pupils and students, and most staff, were sent home and people were told by the government to stay at home. The lockdown had started and an immediate switch to working online from home was made. The teacher education communities in the universities of England had to make rapid personal and professional adjustments for themselves and for the student teachers (hereafter 'trainees') undertaking their ITE programmes. This paper examines the responses to the crisis of four English university providers of ITE: two from the Russell Group and two from post-92 institutions. Those responses lead us to consider the issues of what happens to a model of research-informed professional learning in which the opportunity for classroom engagement is curtailed, and whether trainees can continue to learn anything useful in such circumstances.

## **Methods**

The programme leaders of the ITE courses in the four universities were interviewed, using a semi-structured approach. All gave their consent to provide information about the impact of the lockdown and understood that no further identifying information would be reported. They were asked:

What was the immediate effect of news of the pandemic? Was there any specific advice to higher education institutions?

How did your institution respond to the threat of the pandemic? Did it 'virtualise'? If so, how did this take place? What platforms/processes are in place? What pedagogic issues have arisen?

What specific effect has this had on the HEI-based elements of your teacher education programme/s?

Did you have student teachers on practicum? If so, what will be the impact on the potential curtailment of the length of time they should spend in the classroom?

What do think might be the impact upon the practice/theory nexus in teacher education because of changes due to the pandemic?

The responses of the participants to each of the questions were analysed by constant comparison. The codes used for the participants are A, B, C and D, where A and C are post-92 institutions and B and D are Russell Group institutions.

## **Findings**

### ***The Lockdown and Virtualisation***

The immediate news of the lockdown caused "panic" (A) and "anxiety"; "a complete shock" (C). However, each of the universities' senior managers were quick to reassure staff and students and make arrangements for the abrupt switch to a 'virtual' provision of teaching and learning:

"The VC's advice was very good – caring. We modelled our communication to the trainees on [their] email to staff". (A)

"The university were very clear in their advice, they engaged with Public Health England and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and provided guidance well in advance of the government announcements". (B)

In spite of the rapidly escalating situation of the lockdown, the 'virtualisation' was

quick to happen in each of the institutions. Technical systems, including the universities' virtual learning environments (VLEs) were already in place, although familiarity with the platforms varied. In B and C, both of which had a strong international connection with China, planning for the lockdown was in advance of it coming into force in England. Platforms used across the universities included BlackBoard Collaborate and Microsoft Teams for teaching where group work was required; Google Hangout Meet for whole class activities; Panopto as a video platform; OneNote and BlueSky for submission of online portfolios; telephone, email, WhatsApp and Skype for Business for communicating with trainees. Most of the teacher educators had had at least some experience of using these systems, but none was used to being entirely reliant on them. Each institution provided additional training and reassurance in the use of the platforms, but some issues were thrown up:

“Staff were nervous about online teaching. I had to say to them, ‘you’re not going for an Oscar, and you don’t have to provide everything’. It forced us to reassess what is really important”. (A)

“Not being able to talk to others face to face is problematic. Some students need to talk with people. It can be difficult for them” (C)

There were “Feeling[s] of not being in touch with students” and “distanced from their needs”. (C)

All interviewees agreed that advice from the DfE was slow in coming to teacher education providers:

“The DfE did not prioritise teacher training. ITE was left in limbo”. (C)

“The DfE guidance was very slow in coming. Students came out of school and waited for the DfE guidance to catch up with what was going on. When the advice came it was to provide ‘alternative provision’. Some providers/schools just sent



trainees home. There was some guidance from the Russell Group ITE group but not enough time to properly collaborate across the institutions”. (B)

### *Adaptation of Provision*

There were a number of specific effects on the university-based elements of the programmes. All were forced into a rapid adaptation of expectations of the trainees:

“We decided to go for a four-stage approach. We asked ourselves: 1. What does this trainee need, prior to the session? How can we prepare them for the session? 2. What is the instructional part of the session? What is the key message you want to get across? 3. How can you get the trainees working together collaboratively? Trying to mimic what is happening in the classroom via an on-line pedagogic approach. 4. How do you know that they are learning? We recorded all the sessions so that if they [trainees] were interrupted, e.g. by children around their feet, they could then go back to it. This approach has taken time to develop and was not without initial anxiety from the staff”. (A)

The issue of equity arose as it became apparent that trainees’ circumstances in terms of digital connectivity varied widely. Each of the universities adopted a ‘no detriment’ policy, i.e. that no trainee should be disadvantaged. An innovative approach to tasks and assessments was adopted, for example, trainees recording their teaching on a specific topic/concept and accepting peer feedback (D); microteaching via BlackBoard Collaborate (C) and writing schemes of work (A).

“The focus was on practical activities combined with readings and sharing reflections on these to promote independence, though this still caused a big increase in tutor workload”. (D)

“The whole team, primary and secondary worked together along with some head teachers to develop Core Professional Tasks and a series of supplementary bespoke tasks. It was a hell of a lot of work. But they worked across teams, which is not something they usually do”. (A)

Positive affordances were reported:

“The final week involved whole cohort workshops on issues related to being a teacher: supporting children with dyslexia, your mental health and well-being when you start your first job, being a form tutor, etc., led by school based staff supervised by the programme team. These would normally be done in the university with 25 students to a workshop, and choosing two workshops, but the affordance of the online provision has meant that workshops can accommodate much larger groups (60-70). (D)

In terms of the portfolios of evidence that trainees are required to amass to be awarded QTS, interviewees reported the positive factor of:

“Extra time for sign-off documentation”. (D)

“It has given students 10 weeks to sort out their sign-off documentation rather than three days”. (C)

A most significant finding from the interviews, related to the reduction of time spent in schools occasioned by the lockdown, was the effect of the additional time the trainees had for reading and reflection. There was:

“More time to think, which enabled a deeper understanding of ideas sooner in the programme”. (B)

“If I’m really honest, this space has allowed them to really focus on assignments and tasks and their own practice, not being in the classroom, has worked really well for a lot of trainees: they’ve ‘got’ the theory more”. (A)

“Students are having more time to engage with, and reflect on, the pedagogical literature which has made some comment ‘I’ve done this reading which has helped me to make more sense of what I was doing in the classroom’, which wouldn’t have happened normally as they would still have been on placement”. (D)

There was also some evidence that the quality of the trainees’ written assignments was

better overall than in previous years:

“They have had time to read and reflect more. The last assignment, the Reflective Commentary, is of a higher standard than in previous years”. (A)

However, the opportunity for the more intellectual and academic elements of learning to teach was counterbalanced by a worry about time lost for classroom practice:

“Students will go into schools next year feeling they have had a lot of opportunities to think about how they teach but will be wishing they had done more actual teaching”. (D)

“They are supposed to be practising teaching, but they are having to do completely different things”. (D)

“Some students are frustrated and upset as they are missing 9 weeks of getting better at their teaching”. (C)

“They may struggle next year as NQTs [Newly Qualified Teachers] with the bridging module and the Teach First dissertation module. This may affect their continuation in the master’s programme”. (A)

### ***Teaching Practice Curtailment***

All of the universities in this study had trainees in school placements at the time of the lockdown. Trainees were affected by the loss of between eight and nine weeks (40-45 out of the recommended 120 days). As schools closed down, trainees’ placements came to an abrupt halt:

“Students were being sent home in droves from placement (Phase 2) schools as schools adjusted to the new situation”. (C)

“On 17 March placements were suspended. Schools closed on 20 March. Anxiety resulted for the trainees”. (B)

“The schools closed down on the Friday and they [trainees] came out and went home. They were given a couple of weeks to come to terms with the situation, but reassured and given contact details if needed. This coincided with Easter break. Trainees were immediately told that ‘we will get through this’”. (A)

Schools were required to stay open to provide a place of safety for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. The vast majority of pupils were sent home. The profound effects of what could be up to six months out of school for the nation’s children is a discussion beyond the scope of this paper, but the teacher trainees on placement at this moment of time had mixed experiences:

“About a third of the schools said they did not have the capacity to continue to work with the trainees, but two thirds of the ITE cohort are continuing to work with the schools with online learning.” (A)

That some trainees continued to work in schools raised an issue of equity in that they were getting additional days’ practice that were not available to the whole cohort. It was made clear that this would be on a voluntary basis or not at all:

“Many students wanted to volunteer in schools during the crisis but the university advised them not to do this.” (B)

The universities were quick to implement the ‘no detriment’ policy, but advice from the DfE was slow in coming. On 7<sup>th</sup> April (three weeks after the school closure and suspension of trainees’ placements), the DfE published *Information for providers of initial teacher training courses impacted by the coronavirus (COVID-19)* (DfE 2020). Among other guidance, this introduced the notion of the trajectory to qualification: “DfE will enable ITT providers to make judgements on trainees based on assessments already completed and each trainee’s current trajectory of progress towards meeting the Teachers’ Standards” (DfE 2020).

This important departure meant that university tutors' and school-based mentors' decisions about the award of QTS to trainees who had only completed two thirds of the recommended time in schools could be relied upon by the DfE and its inspection watchdog, OfSTED:

“The government guidance when it came was pragmatic and sensible. Teacher educators were allowed to use their professional judgement – the notion of students who were on a trajectory to pass”. (C)

“In fact, the trajectories route was OK. Out of 200 students there were only 4 or so who did not have enough evidence of upward trajectories, so the outcomes were not dissimilar to those on a normal year”. (B)

The universities adopted similar methods of analysis, but typically:

“Programme Leaders and staff undertook an analysis of their [the trainees'] progress against the standards, using the Standards Assessment Grid devised by [our university] and now adopted widely by ITE providers via UCET<sup>1</sup>. I don't know what we would have done without that grid”. (A)

Trainees received online tutorials and their trajectory was discussed:

“Each trainee was shown by their academic tutor where they were in terms of professional development and told that they had to maintain their standard until the end, or they could improve. Although they are not in front of classes, they can still address the standards through these [Core Professional and bespoke] tasks”. (A)

Each university emphasised to its trainees that the ITE course had not finished and that

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<sup>1</sup> The Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, a national forum for the discussion of matters relating to the education of teachers and professional educators, and to the study of education in the university sector. [www.ucet.ac.uk](http://www.ucet.ac.uk)

they must continue with their work in providing evidence for the Teachers' Standards.

As with all systems of assessment however, the difficulties came at the pass/fail borderline:

“There were some students who for whatever reason (e.g. failing, mitigation, other issues) were not on a trajectory to pass and so when placements were suspended then the new timescale that had been planned to get them back into schools was lost and they have now lost the chance of finishing this year as they were not on a trajectory to pass.” (C)

“The vast majority were already on ‘good’ so in theory they were fine and would be able to finish the programme, but 5-10% depending on the programme were not at that stage of development. 8-10 secondary trainees (out of a cohort of 200) will be returning and about 12 primary, but the good relationship the university has with school partners means that placements won't be a problem”. (A)

The analyses of the trainees' trajectories produced figures showing that the number of trainees who were unlikely to reach the standards by the end of the course was not dissimilar to that of previous years.

Award of QTS implies readiness to take on the work of a teacher in the classroom. One consequence of the loss of a third of their practice time is that these new teachers will need extra support as they start in their first teaching post:

“When they go into their first jobs they will be well behind where they would have been and they will be more nervous as a result”. (D)

“September presents a new set of challenges and the trainees saw that they would need the support.” (A)

Finding high quality school placements for trainees is always important and the additional support as NQTs required for new starters in the academic year 2020-21 could have consequences for next year's cohort of trainees:

“Universities are being encouraged to recruit strongly and heavily but if a school has NQTs it will want to focus support on them rather than ‘outside’ trainees”. (D)

## **Discussion**

This article has discussed and highlighted aspects of the immediate impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on teacher education in England from the perspective of four HEIs that provide ITE programmes. Pre-existing tensions in university-led English teacher education, such as marketization (Whiting 2019, 47), recruitment and retention (Ovenden-Hope et al. 2018), competing pressures of accountability (Duggan and la Velle 2019) and the provision of high quality school placements and associated mentoring (Roofe and Cook 2017) have all been thrown into sharper relief as a consequence of the lockdown occasioned by the onset of the pandemic.

One of the most important features of a university-led initial teacher education is the carefully balanced connection between educational theory and practice. This feature is recognised by some other providers of ITE (see, for example, Educate Teacher Training 2020) who make links with universities to offer master’s level credits leading to PGCE qualifications. We contend that the evidence we collected supports the idea that trainees on ITE routes which include opportunities for research-informed and critical reflection on practice, whether that be through undergraduate or postgraduate routes to QTS, are well-placed to adapt to these changing circumstances. Nevertheless, the consequences of the loss of up to a third of the time during the programme to practice their teaching will be felt by the 2019-20 cohort of NQTs, who, although they have enjoyed additional time to read and reflect will inevitably be less experienced in the ways of the classroom. This will place additional pressures on supporting colleagues in the schools where they take up their first teaching post. The other group of trainees for whom the abrupt termination of their teaching practice will have a profound effect

are those deemed not to be on a trajectory to reach the required standards. Additional placements will be needed for these trainees to achieve QTS. With schools having to come to terms with arrangements for social distancing, hygiene and other matters of health and safety for both pupils and staff, to say nothing of the educational challenges for children who may have missed up to six months in school, it is hard to see them prioritising the needs of a trainee teacher with much ground to make up.

Another finding in this study has been the rapid development of online pedagogy and educational protocols occasioned by university ‘virtualisation’. Academic staff have had to appraise the content of their sessions and courses, and evidence is presented here to suggest that this situation has triggered a fundamental review of what is really important and what is actually possible. This raises the question of whether it is possible to train teachers without the trainees being in the classroom for a significant time. In turn, this has raised issues of authenticity in training and what it means to be in the classroom. There is no doubt that these matters will form the agenda for teacher education in England for some time to come. Trainees who volunteered to help schools teach pupils at home (so-called ‘home schooling’) will have had to consider similar matters. In the words of one participant, “being excellent in the classroom will not be enough [for NQTs starting in 2020-21]. Both teachers and trainees now have to ask themselves, ‘Here’s how it would look in the classroom; now, what would it look like online?’ (A)”

It is interesting to reflect on the possible parallels between teachers’ involvement in ‘home-schooling’ pupils and the implications for teacher educators in the light of the strong likelihood that much ITE in 2020-2021 will involve greater use of online platforms and resources. Evidence is emerging of a large disparity of provision of home schooling by schools (Green 2020). Apart from the educational inequality that this will



inevitably produce, with consequences lasting for an undefinable period into the future not only for schools, but most importantly for individual pupils, there is considerable urgency for the development of an effective pedagogy of online teaching and learning is most pressing (Green 2020). Such disparities have also been noted to involve university students, which include teacher trainees (Bettinger and Loeb 2017; Skidmore 2020), and which can be characterised as a ‘digital divide’ (Pick and Sarkar 2016) in the UK (Office for National Statistics 2019) and elsewhere (Auxier and Anderson 2020; Bozkurt and Sharma 2020; Tudor and Popescu 2020; Tzifopoulos 2020).

These issues have potential implications for teachers and ITE students. Issues, such as how to provide a sequenced scheme of work, how to provide for pupils’ individual learning needs, and how to assess the quality of work children are doing at home, all need to be addressed, as do issues of digital poverty (Montacute 2020). We suggest that recent graduates who have achieved QTS will readily embrace such concerns and will be well placed to help to address them, as some elements of ‘blended learning’ are likely to be in place when the new 2020-21 academic year starts in schools where the physical infrastructure mitigates against the small class sizes needed for social distancing. This small-scale study has provided examples suggesting that time away from the classroom has been beneficial in this regard and ITE providers are now giving serious consideration as to how theory and new forms of practice can more successfully be woven together. In addition, the evidence from this small-scale study suggests that the increased time away from the classroom has given trainees additional opportunities to reflect in detail and in depth on their development as teachers.

An upwardly spiralling cycle of research-based teachers’ knowledge that has been proposed (la Velle and Flores 2018) is pertinent here in the context of a new post-

Covid pedagogy (see Figure 1), particularly as each element of the cycle can be enhanced (though not replaced) by digital technology:



Figure 1. Knowledge Enhancement Framework for blended teaching in the post-Covid age (adapted from la Velle and Flores 2018).

1. New knowledge is generated by research (e.g. online publication); 2. The knowledge is acquired by teachers and trainees (e.g. www, social media, conferencing platforms); 3. This knowledge is transformed into pedagogic content knowledge (Shulman 1987) (simulation software, multimedia; cloud-based collaboration); 4. The knowledge is used in the classroom or online within a planned lesson, task or activity or sequence of these, during which the teacher/trainee evaluates its effectiveness, assessing what is being learned and after which s/he reflects, coming to an enhanced level of pedagogical understanding (communications media, presentation software, polling/voting software; word processing software, etc.).

We argue here that this framework provides a way in which teachers, NQTs and trainees can improve their online teaching. It could form a foundation for the development of meaningful online school placements for trainees, which can address the Teachers' Standards effectively. Each of the eight elements of Part One of the

Standards can be demonstrated within the framework:



Figure 2. Knowledge Enhancement Framework for demonstrating evidence for the Teachers' Standards:

1. Set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge pupils; 2. Promote good progress and outcomes; 3. Demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge; 4. Plan and teach well structured lessons; 5. Adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils; 6. Make accurate and productive use of assessment; 7. Manage behaviour effectively to ensure a good and safe learning environment; 8. Fulfil wider professional responsibilities.

This model does not privilege, or allow to dominate, any one source of learning but instead is robust enough to enable teacher trainees to draw on other sources with the aid of digital technology. It might be argued that, in the 'lockdown scenario', possibilities for reflection-in action and reflection-on-action (Schön 1983) are lost. However, such a view ignores the wider perspective offered by Newman (1996) which recognises that "the social group of teaching, and also the context within which the teaching profession operates, are far more complex than that which is suggested by Schön" (Newman 1996, 308). In addition, other models of reflection such as that of Korthagen (2004) can be

used to give recognition to the changing environments in which teachers work.

## **Conclusion**

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has precipitated an educational crisis, this study presents clear examples of how English HEI providers of ITE responded positively and creatively to protect and encourage their trainees. In addition, teacher educators welcomed the acknowledgment of, and trust placed in, their professional expertise and judgement. The opportunities for development of a new pedagogy for online teacher education opened up dramatically. Yet, working online from home brought new pressures on both tutors', trainees', and teachers' workloads and domestic circumstances. The pressure for the universities to adapt quickly has meant that as yet there has been little opportunity to consult, collaborate or reflect. Those processes are now beginning, and the English teacher education community will learn much from the uniquely different experiences which have been those of the 2019-20 cohort of trainees.

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