

## Teacher educators and the Masters level PGCE

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### Background

In 2004 the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications came into effect and, amongst other things, stipulated that courses with 'postgraduate' in the title must include work at postgraduate or Masters (M) level. The PGCE – Postgraduate Certificate in Education – was a long established route into teaching but its title suggested that the academic work was at a higher level than the work on an undergraduate degree, and for many courses this was not the case. From 2007 the PGCE has become both the Postgraduate Certificate in Education, which has M level components, and the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education, where work is at Honours level. Both routes lead to qualified teacher status (QTS) but no guidance is given beyond the requirements for QTS, so courses can vary significantly between institutions.

Interviewees in an article in *The Independent* (Hackett, 2008) suggested that teacher educators were in favour of M level qualifications but with some reservations. A Masters qualification for teachers must not be too inflexible or undermine the range of existing Masters degrees, and the content should not be too prescribed or too related to practice – this would not be concerned with deep learning and reflection on practice and, if school-based, would be taught by teachers who do not have a Masters degree themselves. Encouraging teachers to do more studying was seen as a positive move in view of the difficulty of packing so much into a one year PGCE, although a concern raised by Edwards and Pope (2006) is that the PGCE does not give trainees the experience of research methodologies that might be encountered on a traditional Masters course, nor are PGCE students engaging with the same level of academic and research literature.

Although the change to the PGCE came about through correcting an anomaly following the Bologna Declaration, it fits in with government plans for teaching to become a Masters level profession, and pleases those who want a move away from standards and competencies in teacher education. Teaching on the PGCE with Masters level components raises a number of issues for teacher educators, not least because a significant number do not themselves have a Masters degree, having been recruited for their skills and experience as teachers and headteachers in schools. Although the response of tutors to the change was generally positive, there were a number of concerns about how best to support students with the Masters level components of the PGCE.

### Approach/methodology

There were three strands to the research – a discussion group of PGCE tutors, a questionnaire survey and interviews with a sample of respondents. The different strands of the research took place over several months.

### Outcomes

Most of the discussion in the discussion groups centred around the issue of criticality and the impact of M level. Irrespective of M level the role of the university part of the course is about questioning and being critical, which differs from what students do in school – it is important to have students engaging at Masters level even if they do not want the credits because it is the critical analysis which is important. But then there were questions about critical analysis - how to define it, whether it is transferable, whether you have to be disposed towards it and what does it mean to read critically - how to encourage students to write about their writing, and think about their thinking. This was a serious concern for a number of tutors – how could they support students at M level when they did not have experience of M level work themselves. To deal with this we produced a brief guide for students on critical reading and writing, which would support students who were inexperienced at this kind of work and be a resource for tutors. Intended for the Department of Postgraduate Initial Teacher Education (POINTED) this has now been widely used throughout the Faculty of Education.

In the questionnaire survey 26 questionnaires were returned, covering a range of tutor experience, role and programmes. Generally respondents were feeling more positive and 10 respondents said they were excited by the challenge, although eight were a little apprehensive and seven felt they were in need of more training. Areas which were causing particular concern were students' critical reading and writing, ensuring consistency in marking assessments and tutor expertise in research methodology and analysing data. There were also seen to be issues about how M level learning could be integrated into the PGCE, a taught course where a significant amount of time is spent in schools on placement.

It was noticeable that the interviewees gave different views from the questionnaire survey – they were more positive and more reflective. It is unclear whether this was to do with the timing – the interviews came after the survey – or the people interviewed, who were all experienced programme leaders with Masters degrees. Although there were some negatives, the interviewees felt that M level was a good thing, particularly for primary students, who were under a lot of pressure and needed the confidence and skills to question government policies. In terms of schools, it was felt that many were still not clear about the difference between the two PGCEs. There was a perceived gap between theory and practice, and a dilemma as different knowledge is prized at school and at university. Some school mentors were not supportive of the change – they could not see the point, and could not support students at M level having not studied at this level themselves, so there was a problem when students wanted to discuss readings etc with their school mentor. Some schools were very supportive eg if a student's research fits with school improvement plans, others say they need to concentrate on becoming a newly qualified teacher (NQT) and school work. Overall it was felt to be a very positive change, which had led to a great deal of discussion and debate, and to tutors themselves being more reflective.

Asked whether they thought the M level work added value to students' work and their development as beginning teachers, one tutor thought it probably did but it was too early to say, while others said definitely yes – "before there has been a sort of anti intellectualism" and it was helping to develop students' criticality, reflection, research skills and ability to question.

## Enhancing RIT

The findings of the research were discussed at POINTED departmental meetings and presented at an ESCalate<sup>1</sup> conference in May 2009.

The project gave teacher educators the opportunity to express their views and hear from others. The research itself informed their teaching, but also provided a resource for them to support the work of trainee teachers, and thus inform their teaching.

## Reflections and any future plans

The initial funding application set out plans for tutors and trainees to work together on research projects, and to provide a resource bank of 'things that work' in terms of supporting students' Masters level work, but it soon became clear that a number of tutors would not be confident to do this, hence the shift in emphasis. There are currently no plans for any further work on this project but it would be useful to revisit the original project when tutors have more experience of M level work.

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1. ESCalate is the Higher Education Academy subject centre for education