

When worlds collide – Examining the Challenges Faced by Teacher Education Programmes Combining Professional Vocational Competence with Academic Study, Lessons from Further Education to Higher Education

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Abstract This paper examines the challenges faced by higher education institutions in designing, teaching and quality assuring programmes of study which, of necessity, must combine the gaining of professional vocational competence with academic study. The paper gives recognition to the policy framework in which these programmes fit – with particular reference to teacher education. It presents the challenges at each stage, from ensuring that curriculum design meets the needs of the profession, to the quality assurance mechanisms which ensure standards and compliance. Initially the paper draws on published research to examine how and why these policy decisions have been taken in much of the developed world. The paper goes on to present a new perspective, however, by comparing current teacher education mechanisms with those that have developed in the past twenty years in further education, looking at the parallels and addressing how far we can learn from the experiences of further education colleagues to ensure that we manage to combine the two different worlds of academia and vocational training without compromising either. It suggests ways in which higher education institutions can learn from further education to tackle the challenges to ensure that concentration on training students to be good teachers is done without compromising personal growth and intellectual development, and examines how far it is possible to meet the demands of higher education quality controls which are applied with differential emphases.

Keywords Quality Measures, Vocational Higher Education, Lessons from F.E.

training were straightforward. If you wanted to be a hairdresser, a bricklayer or a motor mechanic you knew exactly how to learn to do it because all vocational training was via an apprenticeship model – what was known affectionately as “sitting by Nellie” [1] This represented a mode of learning a vocational craft which relied on watching the ‘expert’, copying what he or she did and then repeating it yourself. Regulatory/employer bodies said what you should learn and how you should do it and set the criteria which learners had to achieve in practice; meanwhile colleges provided the academic input - more for some subjects and less for others. In some areas this would require a block of time away from practice, in other areas it would be evening classes or day-release classes which provided the theory behind the practice. For higher level vocational subjects such as medicine or teaching, there was a sustained period of academic study in university followed by a mix of academic study and practice, linking the practical to the theoretical with an emphasis on combining the two. The focus of the academic study was not static and over the years of the twentieth century there were several paradigm shifts as identified by Broudy [2], as teacher training moved from an emphasis on skills to an emphasis on reflective practice and back again. These issues are also highlighted by Schon [2] and by Burke [3]. Overall, however, those teaching in higher education emphasized the professional and theoretical and linked it to practice at later stages. As the years have progressed, however, these models have become more complex at every level and currently the higher level training programmes, as exemplified by teacher training, are moving ever closer to the old “sitting by Nellie” [1] approaches whilst measures of quality in the provision of these programmes move ever closer to the models which have pertained in further education for several decades.

The Methodological Framework

This paper does not attempt to present an empirical study

1. Introduction

Once upon a time, in England and Wales, education and

but, rather, seeks to provide a discursive article using a comparative theoretical framework. This is chosen because, as the paper is examining policy decision making, this lends itself to a comparative study, as identified by Novoa and Yariv-Mashal [5]. The methodological perspective is taken from Holmes [6] who stresses its links to Dewey's [7] seminal idea that the reflective method of thinking can lead to a problem-solving approach in comparative studies by posing a problem, analysing it and then suggesting solutions. This methodology links to a socio-cultural paradigm as the whole issue of educational policy-making is irrevocably tied to historic and geographic social and cultural factors and issues. The paper will argue that the shift towards quantitative measures of quality in higher education (H.E.) reflects previous movements in further education (F.E.) and is now raising the same problems that that sector has had to address.

In using a comparative problem-solving approach the paper draws on the Bray and Thomas cube model [8] focusing most emphatically upon the third dimension of this model – *the aspects of education and society*. In later work Bray et al [9] describe such an approach as one which is designed to:

“[...] undertake comparisons in order to improve understanding both of the forces which shape educational systems and processes and of the impact of educational systems and processes on social and other development”
(ibid. p 16)

The paper will argue that the lessons from F.E. could usefully serve as warnings to H.E. if it is to avoid losing its focus as a process which opens minds and prepares trainee teachers to be lateral thinkers capable of reflective learning and, instead, goes along the reductionist path of designing programmes whose quality is measured through a series of number-crunching exercises.

The Changing Climate

As the twentieth century progressed towards the millennium, things began to change in English education. The UK government began to get much more involved in education as it became a vote-winning (or vote-losing) issue, as described by Pollitt and Bouckaert [10]. As the world shrank through the rise of multi-national organisations the national government became much more involved in the day-to-day running of schools, hospitals and other sectors where previously they had left such matters to those whom they regarded as autonomous professionals, as argued by Bottery [11].

The influence of the rise of multinational institutions is also, in itself, a reason for government intervention. This rise is without historical parallel and has persuaded the UK national government to look at education and training in terms of trans-national competition and to formulate policy in response to two factors:

1. the qualifications demands of the powerful multinational companies and financial and trade organisations; and
2. the perception of where their countries are located within an international league table of skills and attainment.

In addition to governmental involvement, the demands of the job market and increasing numbers of graduates began to play a part in the changing educational climate; what Berg called “a race in which everyone runs harder but no-one wins” as cited in Thomas p. 29 [12]. Thus every job began to demand higher and higher entry qualifications and exit awards. Jobs which had required school-leaving certification in the past now also demanded post-statutory schooling qualifications. Jobs which demanded Diploma level qualifications now began to seek those with degrees and so the spiral continued to rise.

To some extent this reflected the sheer numbers of those who were accessing higher level qualifications in the second half of the twentieth century, thereby giving employers much greater choice in who they selected. It also reflected, however, the increasing range of skills needed in order to do most jobs. A particular example is provided by ICT, highlighted by Shaw [13], where skills undreamt of in the past were now routinely required in most professions. Without doubt the acquisition of higher level skills is critical to students in a competitive job market for, as Shaw found in an empirical study of student outcomes:

The students who had had the widest and most substantial work experience emerged as being better placed to access postgraduate study and complete it successfully and/or access graduate level employment.
[ibid p. 167]

The position in England

In order to understand the context of this paper, it is necessary to have some understanding of the systems currently in play in England. At present, all English education is divided into eight levels from Level 1 (basic secondary education) to Level 8 (doctoral level). A key point is that today, in England, progression is possible between all levels and types of qualification as identified in a range of texts such as Shaw & McAndrew [14] and Shaw [15]. Making a decision to enter a vocational route at age 16 does not debar one from accessing a higher academic route later although there are still some cultural barriers in play as described by Connor et al [16]. This allows higher education students, for example teacher trainees, to be drawn from a wide range of backgrounds, not just the traditional academic routes of the past, and therefore gives access to a much wider field of applicants than in the past. It also, however, adds a further complication to designing and delivering good training programmes which can meet both academic and vocational targets, because the backgrounds of the incoming students are so diverse.

2. Curriculum and Regulation on Mixed Academic and Vocational Programmes

In each of the areas, and at each of the levels, there are regulatory bodies which set the curriculum and establish the criteria for success. There are also national inspection bodies which routinely assess the quality of provision. For schools there is a National Curriculum, there are set tests, Awarding Body (e.g. Edexcel) regulated public examinations and Ofsted inspections. For F.E. there are Awarding Body (e.g. BTEC/City & Guilds) competence-led curricula, public examinations, external verification of results and Ofsted inspections. For H.E. there are internal Periodic Reviews which are peer-led and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) reviews of curriculum; for vocational degrees there are also professional body standards-led curricula and inspection regimes – e.g. by the Teaching Agency for teaching. This leads to substantial differences in H.E. between those who offer professional/vocational degrees and those who offer non-vocational academic degrees. For non-vocational academic degrees (such as history, philosophy, geography, mathematics) universities:

- set their own curriculum (guided by QAA benchmark suggestions of content)
- devise their own learning outcomes
- set their own timetables

For vocational/professional degrees (such as teaching, nursing, social work) universities:

- have to conform to all of the above AND
- follow the guidelines of their professional body
- meet the standards for competence set by their professional body
- ensure that practice opportunities are built into the programmes
- inspect practice providers to ensure that they also meet professional body requirements

There are challenges in the devising of curricula for both sets of academic staff. The whole notion of designing a curriculum to pre-determined learning outcomes has received much criticism, and in some cases it has even been suggested that this learning-outcome-driven approach is counter-productive as it undermines the epistemology of higher education. They suggest that the focus on learning outcomes and quantifiable measures of success loses the fundamental notion of what H.E. is, and should be, about as described by Burke [4], Arnal & Burwood [17], and Burwood & Palaiologou [18]. There is much to commend these criticisms in that they give recognition to the fundamental nature of learning at this level with its emphasis on lateral thinking, questioning and debate as opposed to the hitting of concrete “targets”, as if learning was a functional activity with set outcomes to be achieved. Nevertheless, those who design curricula for non-vocational programmes have freedom to create learning outcomes which move

beyond the concrete and into the wider philosophical scope of education, but those who are designing vocational programmes are critically handcuffed to sets of learning criteria to be achieved.

The challenges

As well as philosophical challenges relating to whether the vocational degree subjects in H.E. are truly leading to creating professionals or to training craftsmen and craftswomen these issues raise considerable practical problems to solve. For example, the university year runs from October – May but postgraduate teacher trainees have to be in university from September – July to fit in their practice days. This leads to a wealth of problems with timetabling, facility opening hours, staffing and student support. More significant than the practical problems are the considerable cultural challenge raised by the operation of vocational teacher training degrees; these stem from the fact that universities have at their heart the need to encourage their students to question received wisdom, argue and debate whilst schools, headteachers and Ofsted inspectors very definitely do not encourage this.

Students on vocational programmes in universities face extreme pressure. They have to achieve academically to a high standard to gain their degree but at the same time they have to learn their craft as vocational experts and meet set performance criteria. The biggest challenge they face is also related to the cultural differences, as highlighted above. They have to balance being critical learners in their academic studies with being obedient practitioners in their placements. These two roles can often be in direct contrast to each other which presents the student with an endless cycle of switching from one to the other. It can also cause conflict for those who are responsible for teaching and training them; almost all those who have taught trainee teachers have faced the situation of having an excellent practitioner amongst the student group who could not achieve academically and thus was ‘failing’ despite being wonderful in the classroom, or, conversely, an academically gifted student who could not perform at a suitable level in the classroom.

In order to meet these challenges university staff have to work ceaselessly to involve practitioners in the academic side of the teaching, involve academic staff in the training elements of the programme of study and provide students with all the necessary forums to discuss their practice and relate it to theory under the guidance of staff from both sides of the divide. It is truly a situation in which very different worlds are continually colliding in the efforts to meet both sets of criteria and both sets of masters. The biggest challenges, however, are those which come under the heading of “quality assurance”.

3. How Quality Is Assessed

In relation to professional practice, quality must be

measured against concrete skill standards. This strongly reflects the ways in which quality is assessed at lower levels in F.E. colleges and it is here that we see how H.E. is moving ever closer to the quantitative assessment of quality which has developed over recent years, not just in terms of vocational degrees but in relation to all its provision. The two models – F.E. and H.E. – belong to different cultural heritages and are underpinned by different epistemologies; thus the slow introduction of the F.E. models of quality assurance are now coming into conflict with the traditional H.E. models. This is nowhere more apparent than in vocational higher education programmes.

When we examine the different models of quality assessment we find:

- In F.E. it is very structured and driven by quantitative measures – tied to retention rates, success rates and funding
- In H.E. it has traditionally been:
 - teaching which is led by peer-reviewed research of international quality
 - acceptance of the best possible candidates for places (with no pressure in terms of recruitment targets)
 - academic staff with freedom to challenge the status quo

Yet in a changing climate in H.E. quality is rapidly becoming measured by quantitative data and this causes problems exactly as it does in FE. For example – each university is placed in a league table of “university success” and if it falls below a certain point it can be excluded by overseas governments with catastrophic effects on finance. The criteria used include things like “the number of firsts and 2:1s” (classified as value-added), student perceptions, staff-student ratios, face-to-face class hours and employment rates. These measures can be in direct conflict with the old traditional measures of H.E. quality; for example, the raising of classroom hours and lowering of staff student ratios inevitably reduces the time available for research to underpin teaching.

These anomalies exist for all H.E. programmes but are even more marked for programmes such as teacher training where Ofsted inspections are driven by examinations of quantitative data. As an example, Ofsted inspections will assess the quality of support for students with disabilities by comparing the pass rates and attainment grades for disabled students against the same rates for non-disabled students. They do not assess how much support has been given, the forms which it has taken, the relevance of the support or the nature of the disability. These are qualitative measures which do not figure in their calculations of quality.

Why Does It Matter?

This paper argues that these changes matter because the lessons from F.E. in the last twenty years would suggest that moving towards a quantitative model of assessment does nothing to drive up quality but, rather, it serves as a

reductionist model which undermines real quality in learning and teaching in favour of a simple numerical model. Whilst it is clearly important that students, staff and interested stakeholders such as parents, employers and government can have accurate information about the standards which students attain and which H.E. institutions deliver, there is not a clear positive correlation between the number of times and ways that something is measured and the quality that is delivered. Indeed, by removing the professional elements of measurement and replacing them with reductive quantitative snapshots, there is a clear danger that the deeper nuances of learning are lost in a welter of bureaucratic score-sheets. This is even truer when funding is subsequent upon the story which such quantitative measures tell. The Wolf Report [19] has already identified that such measures in F.E. have been actively damaging to quality. Wolf says in the report:

The current payment system post-16 (like performance tables pre-16) gives institutions strong incentives to steer students into courses they can pass easily. In addition, since most vocational courses are entirely teacher-assessed, pressures to reduce standards apply directly to a very high proportion of post-16 provision. (ibid. p.61)

Wolf goes on to recommend disaggregating funding from success in F.E. to ensure that quality is maintained, yet at the same time H.E. is inexorably sliding down the same path and thus heading for a system which puts pressure on staff to indulge in grade inflation to ensure league table status and subsequently funding.

Similarly, the criteria contained in the new Ofsted Framework [20] make demands which force staff into impossible positions. The quality of a teacher training provider is predicated upon the attainment of students in practice placements. The attainment grades are derived from a wide range of measures, mostly assessed by the H.E. staff themselves, and only those providers who have high numbers of trainees gaining the top grades can be guaranteed an allocation of places on their teacher training programmes in subsequent years. Thus an H.E. provider can only guarantee that they will have students (and consequently jobs for staff) in future if all their trainees attain the highest grades in their teaching practice placements. The flaws in this system hardly need to be spelt out and, as Wolf [19] has identified, have led in F.E. – where this format has been applied for decades - to a situation where students are not sufficiently challenged for fear that they might fail and this has led inexorably to a decline in standards.

The link between changes in measurement and declining standards has been explored by others such as Hursh [21] and James [22] who have identified it as a phenomenon which has arisen in many countries across the world. In UK universities and other H.E. institutions, however, there is a clear example provided by changes in F.E. which can be used to highlight the dangers and allow avoidance of these, thus maintaining the key aspects of H.E. quality, i.e. producing

well-informed graduates who are able to think laterally, debate, problem-solve and contribute to the educational health of future generations. Only by returning to allowing H.E. staff autonomy to use professional judgement in selecting and assessing students, and disaggregating university funding from quantitative measures of debatable validity can this happen.

4. Conclusions

For generations things have remained the same; now education is moving at a breakneck pace with change every year - this mirrors the way the world is changing and we need to be ready to adapt. For those who are training the professionals of the future this is a daunting task but in order to do it effectively, universities need to ensure that they successfully marry up the two worlds of academic study and professional craft. They need also to ensure that quality measures, devised to assess craft skills and reduce everything to simple numerical data, do not become the drivers of academic standards. Students need to be given clear sets of skills in order to become good practitioners, but in H.E. they also still need safe spaces to question received wisdom, challenge the status quo and continually reflect on how, when and where this is (and is not) acceptable.

Bridging the gap between the practical and the academic is now critical; practitioners of the future will all need academic skills as well as practical ones to cope and be the best in the 21st century. In addition, university staff need to be creative in meeting quality targets which come from both sides of the divide – those from the academic masters and those from the vocational masters. We must learn from the experiences in Further Education and not be driven ceaselessly down the path of ‘counting beans’ as a means of measuring academic quality. Good teachers need to be intellectually gifted, academically adept and have the ability to think laterally to pursue their craft. They hold children’s intellectual lives in their hands and the university sector must not be driven by a quantitative imperative to devalue their education and training and reduce an assessment of quality to countable pieces of information. We need teachers who can deliver effective lessons but we also need them to be creative, clever, vibrant individuals who can ‘think outside the box’ to inspire the next generation. In order to do this teacher trainers need to be willing to create quality systems which meet national targets but to do so with a firm vision that education is about much more than a simplistic reductionist stance. They must encourage debate and challenge at every opportunity to ensure that tomorrow’s teachers are as good as they can possibly be.

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