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The role of teacher educator virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) in mobilising policy engagement: A case study of the initial teacher training market review from England

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ABSTRACT

Attempts to solve perceived policy problems in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) have seen national and international jurisdictions increasingly centralising ITE curricula, coupled with monitoring and auditing of outcomes against defined sets of professional standards. This paper reports the findings of a documentary analysis of 75 items of publicly available literature generated by stakeholders between 2 July and 30 September 2021, in response to a Market Review of Initial Teacher Training in England. The paper outlines how online platforms and networks can serve as Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoP), which can mobilise teacher educators to engage with and critique policy making. Discourse emerging from the analysis of the 75 items focuses on key concerns associated with teacher supply, quality and questions the evidence for wholesale changes to ITE. This paper highlights that the voice of teacher educators in England is marginalised and offers a cautionary tale for colleagues currently immersed in international efforts to “reform” and “review” ITE. We argue that this case study illustrates the potential for the international sector to form a VCoP and through these, to challenge postulated “solutions” to espoused policy “problems” in ITE.

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Introduction

Successive phases of review and reform of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) have been a persistent feature of global educational policy making over at least the last 30 years (Alexander & Bourke, 2021; Mutton et al., 2021). Such reforms have sought to increase regulatory control over the ITE sector through a focus on quality, “school-led” provision and centralised curricula, which are driven by a focus on “professional standards” and “accountability” (Alexander & Bourke, 2021; Churchward & Willis, 2019; Duncan, 2009; Mutton et al., 2017). The pervasive nature of this “accountability agenda” is found in ITE reforms across the globe, including in Australia (Alexander & Bourke, 2021), England (Ellis

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et al., 2019; Mutton et al., 2021) and the U.S.A (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019). Critics of such reforms have argued that the narrowing of teacher education curricula has resulted in both the de-professionalisation of teachers and the continued reproduction of social inequalities (Dwyer et al., 2020). There is a persistent global characterisation of teachers and ITE as a series of “policy problems” which require “policy solutions” (Skourdoumbis, 2017), to repair a “broken system” (Duncan, 2009) or to solve a “wicked problem” (Alexander & Bourke, 2021). Alexander and Bourke (2021) argue that this framing of ITE places additional demands on teacher educators to be politically savvy and to publicly challenge policy that represents ITE in this way.

Drawing on a recent case study of ITE review and reform from England, UK, this paper responds to the call of Alexander and Bourke (2021) for teacher educators to be politically engaged. We seek to respond to this call through a review of online publications authored by ITE stakeholders (including school teachers, leaders and parents, Higher Education Institutions, Unions, subject associations and learned societies) in response to the recent Initial Teacher Training Market Review Report (ITT MR) in England (Department for Education [DfE], 2021). As others have previously highlighted (e.g., Ellis, 2021), we argue that such a case study provides an opportunity to explore future directions and outcomes for accountability has driven reviews of ITE systems across the world. We reflect on how online platforms and networks can serve as Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoPs) which can mobilise and enable teacher educators “to embed themselves in the political work required to engage with and critique these politically driven agendas” (Alexander & Bourke, 2021, p. 484).

The context of the initial teacher training market review report in England

ITE in England has been a site of “persistent turbulence” (McIntyre et al., 2019 p.153) for at least 30 years, with the pace of change having accelerated since 2010 (Murray & Mutton, 2016). A recurrent theme in England, is that the *university* is presented as the central “problem;” placing too great an emphasis on “theory” with insufficient time devoted to learning the “craft” of teaching (Mutton et al., 2021). Such a characterisation has led to the pursuit of a “school-led” system of ITE accompanied by a perceived “desire to reduce (or, as some believed, even remove) the role of universities in the training of teachers” (Mutton et al., 2017, p. 16). Since 2010, the government in England has chosen to use the term Initial Teacher Training (ITT) as opposed to Initial Teacher Education when describing the preparation of teachers. Here, the authors use ITT only when referring to the Department for Education and others’ use of the term and instead, use ITE as the term, which we argue best describes the process and practice of becoming a teacher – education, not simply training.

The increasing trend in favour of school-led ITE is premised on an ideologically driven understanding of teaching as a “craft” that can be learnt entirely in a school-based setting (McNamara & Murray, 2013). Yet, teacher education is a much more complex, multi-faceted and intellectual activity (Winch et al., 2015), and universities offer opportunities for the development of more nuanced conceptual learning (Tang et al., 2019). This includes opportunities for pre-service teachers to develop and enhance their professional identity, develop agency and engage in research-informed practice. Peiser et al. (2022) argues that there is a place for both contextual

and conceptual elements; both essential to professional learning. Educational settings and their partnerships are part of a wider social world, and Bain et al. (2017) note that school-university partnerships have the capacity to meet the social circumstances of both settings. The value of this approach is that learning is shared within a collaborative environment where the historical, cultural and social context are integral (Wang et al., 2011) and school-university partnerships have the potential to support and enrich the communities they serve.

Consistent with international trends in ITE review and reform, declarations continue to be made that the preparation of pre-service teachers in England requires attention. In response to the Carter (2015) of the quality of ITT in England, the government published two policies in quick succession: (1) Early-Career Framework (ECF) (DfE, 2019a) and (2) Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Training (CCF) (DfE, 2019b). Together, these policies seek to standardise what beginning teachers need to know and be able to do during their initial year of “training” and subsequent two years of induction (Mutton et al., 2021). Such a prescription in ITE lies in direct conflict with Sahlberg’s (2007) description of a “culture of trust” with educators, teachers, schools and universities designing assessments and curricula in response to student need, and with respect to professional expertise.

The implementation of the CCF and ECF coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic which posed huge challenges for the education sector across the world (la Velle et al., 2020). Yet, in England during this period, a new inspection framework for ITT was introduced by the Office for standards in education (Ofsted, 2020) and Ofsted also published a report focused on provision for those becoming teachers during the pandemic period (Ofsted, 2021). Both the new inspection framework (Ofsted, 2020) and Ofsted’s (2021) report foreground the importance of the CCF stating, for example, “inspectors should ... discuss how the partnership ensures that it meets the minimum expectations set out in the ITT core content framework, ensuring coverage of all ‘learn that’ and ‘learn how to’ statements” (Ofsted, 2021, p. 25), with the report highlighting that “too few partnerships have a sufficiently ambitious ITE curriculum” (Ofsted, 2021). Such failings were apparently not visible under the previous inspection framework (Ofsted, 2015) where 100% of ITE provision was graded as “good” or “outstanding.” The DfE is statutorily obliged to consider these grades, having the power to consider the withdrawal of a provider’s accreditation to deliver ITE. Despite this absence of concern documented under the previous inspection framework, the new inspection framework, coupled with an assessment of perceived lack of ambition during a period of pandemic, provided the rationale in 2021 for the DfE to commission the ITT MR (DfE, 2021). The review was undertaken by an “expert advisory group” which included one Professor of Education from an HEI and four senior leaders from Multi-Academy Trusts (DfE, 2021). The review, initially began in early 2020, was paused in response to COVID-19 in England and resumed in January 2021. The results of the review were published on 2nd July 2021, and a short period of public consultation occurred until 22nd August 2021 (DfE, 2021). The stated aim of the review was to ensure that “all trainees receive high-quality training” and that the “ITT market” has “capacity” and “benefits all schools” (DfE, 2021). A key goal of the review was to implement a common core curriculum for ITE, with fidelity to the Core Content Framework and to achieve this by a two-stage re-accreditation process for all providers. Other changes include mandating “intensive practice” school placements and changes to

mentoring in schools, including increasing the amount of time expected for both mentoring and mentor training.

The focus of this research is on the sector response during this period of consultation. In what follows, we set out our theoretical framework.

Theoretical framework

Our research draws on Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of Communities of Practice (CoP). Wenger states that: "communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2011, p.1). Whilst the concept of face-to-face CoP within the education sector is well-documented, the evolution of networked virtual communities (VCoP) through online platforms and social media also has the potential to encourage the creation and exchange of scholarly knowledge (Kassens-Noor, 2012). VCoP can facilitate both synchronous and asynchronous interactions and provide access to a larger community with which to share knowledge and build relationships, whilst removing time, cost, space, and geographical constraints (Johnson et al., 2019). The potential value of a VCoP developed through, for example, online blogs and social media platforms, such as Twitter, is explored through this case study, as members of the ITE CoP (including school-based mentors and school leaders, teacher educators and senior leaders in ITE based in HEIs) sought to engage collaboratively through their reactions and responses to ITT MRR (DfE, 2021). We understand the ITE CoP in its broadest sense to include all those working to support initial teacher education in schools (teachers, mentors, school leaders), universities (teacher educators, education academics, senior leaders), subject associations and learned societies and recognise that people's work often sits across more than one of the roles at any one time.

Our research questions were:

- How did the teacher education sector respond to the ITT Market Review in England?
- To what extent, and in which ways, does the concept of virtual communities of practice provide a useful model for teacher educators in other geographical contexts to respond to ITE policy reform?

Methodology

The methodological approach of this study is premised on a documentary review and analysis of publicly available literature generated in response to the ITT MR (DfE, 2021). The review took the form of a literature review with four distinct stages: (1) discussion of the review strategy, (2) identification of the literature – using inclusion and exclusion criteria (see below), (3) extraction of the key information from the literature, (4) synthesis of the literature.

Discussion of the review strategy

A discussion of the review strategy was undertaken by the two authors based upon published guidance (Siddaway et al., 2019) and on the second author's previous

experience of conducting reviews in the field of education (e.g., Rushton & Reiss, 2021). This included:

(1) *Agreeing a focus for the review on literature* produced as an immediate response to the ITT MR, authored by stakeholders. This included blogs and responses authored by individuals and institutions and published in a variety of formats (e.g. individual and institutional websites, opinion pieces for industry publications) but did not include reporting by journalists. This was to ensure that the opinions and perspectives of stakeholders were to the fore as opposed to articles and reporting which may have requirements to provide balance or distil complex issues for their readership. This meant that we included articles such as Sims (2021) and Lock (2021) published in *Schools Week* as they were authored by stakeholders but excluded those authored by a journalist rather than a stakeholder. Institutional responses (for example those provided by Subject Associations) were often accompanied by a short descriptive item and these were often hosted on a separate webpage to the consultation response. To avoid duplication, we only included the consultation response itself.

(2) *Discussing routes to identifying literature*. The purpose of this study is to consider material published rapidly during a specific and short time period by stakeholders in response to the ITT MR. This material included blogs and opinion pieces published on individual and institutional websites and in industry publications. Therefore, the use of electronic databases such as the British Education Index (BEI) which contain an index of literature published in peer review journals, conference papers, proceedings, reports and doctoral theses was not appropriate. Instead, routes to identify these more 'informal' and immediate responses were explored including Twitter and identifying blogs via key informants (see point 5).

(3) *Identifying a shared understanding of the stakeholders involved in ITE*. This included but was not limited to schools (teachers, parents, school leaders), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Unions, learned societies and subject associations.

(4) *Agreeing a specific time frame for the review*. We decided to focus on literature published once the ITT MR itself was published (2nd July 2021) so that any responses included in our review were written in the context of a publicly available document. We extended our period to include and go beyond the consultation period of the ITT MR (which ended on 22nd August 2021). We recognised that the consultation period was shorter than the recommended twelve weeks suggested as a suitable period (Cabinet Office, 2008) and held over the summer vacation period which could limit the capacity of stakeholders to respond. By extending our period to include the month of September we argue we were able to capture the 'immediate' responses of the sector more fully.

(5) *Agreeing an identification strategy to be used in the subsequent phases of literature identification* which began with a Google search during the period 2nd July – 30th September 2021. This was supplemented with a search of Twitter using the terms #ITTMarket Review. In addition, we contacted eight key informants to ensure that, as far as possible, we were able to identify relevant rapid responses to the literature during this period.

(6) Identifying keywords and/or terms to be used in the subsequent phases of literature identification: *ITT Market Review*, *Initial Teacher Training (ITT)*, *Initial Teacher Education (ITE)*.

Identification of the literature

The following steps were undertaken to identify material to be included in the review.

(1) A search using *Google*, using the search terms identified in the previous stage and during the period 2nd July – 30th September 2021 and, published in English. This produced a pool of over 950 items to review.

(2) Each item was read fully to determine if it was authored by a stakeholder and was focused on responding to the ITT MR. This created a list of 90 items to read fully.

(3) A search was made using Twitter for additional items published during the time period using the hashtag #ITTMarketReview and this resulted in 20 items to be read in full, a total of 110 items at the end of this stage.

(4) Eight key informants from the ITE sector were contacted by email to identify potentially relevant items. These key informants held significant responsibility for leading ITE in their respective HEIs. They were an opportunity sample representing research intensive HEI providers in England who had previously worked collaboratively on matters associated with ITE. This gave a further 10 items to be added to the items identified in previous stages, a total of 120 research items.

Extraction of the key information from the literature

(1) When reading the 120 research items, specific information was entered in an Excel spreadsheet: publication source, author, publication date (or accessed date if this was not available), title, stakeholder role.

(2) Through this review of the 120 research items, we developed the following inclusion criteria:

- (a) Self-identified by the author(s) as including the ITT MR as a central focus of the item.
- (b) Authored by a stakeholder.
- (c) The response was substantive and not simply a press release to accompany an individual or institutional response to the ITT MR consultation.
- (d) Date of publication 2 July to 30 September 2021.

Application of the inclusion criteria resulted in a total of 75 items, which are presented in [Table 1](#).

Limitations of the review

Whilst we suggest that the combination of *Google*, *Twitter* and key informants provided diverse ways to identify relevant literature, we accept that our review cannot be considered as a systematic review of the available literature. The decision to focus on a time period that began once the ITT MR had been published meant that items produced in the weeks and months before publication were excluded. The geographical focus of the ITT MR is England and therefore a consideration of items written in English is arguably appropriate; however, we do accept that relevant items may have been written and published in other languages, which we have not considered. As authors of this paper, and as teacher educators, we believe that it is important to note that our position is not impartial with regard to the proposals of the ITT MR. As providers of ITE we acknowledge that we have a vested interest in supporting a sector that values HEI provision and believe

Table 1. Publications from stakeholders included in the review.

Author and date of publication	Stakeholder/Group	Nature of item
Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), Accessed on 20 th September 2021	Professional Association	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Association of Science Education (ASE) Accessed on 20 th September	Subject Association	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Bauckham, I. 26 th July 2021	School Leader, Ofqual	Article for <i>Times Educational Supplement</i>
Bingle, B. 21 st September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Article for Teachwire
British Educational Research Association (BERA), 11 th August 2021	Professional Association	Statement in response to the ITT Market Review consultation
British Educational Research Association (BERA), 19 th August 2021	Professional Association	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Brooks, C. 2 nd September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Blog for University College London Institute of Education
Cater, J. 9 th July 2021	Policy organisation	Article for the Higher Education Policy Institute
Clarke, M. & Parker, K., 17 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution	Article for <i>The Conversation</i>
Daly, C., 13 th August 2021	Higher Education Institution	Blog for University College London Institute of Education
Ellis, V., 9 th August 2021	Higher Education Institution	Blog for Australian Association for Research in Education
Generate School Teaching Hub, 12 th August 2021	School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT)	Initial response and information to support partners to respond to the consultation.
Geographical Association, 1 st August 2021	Subject Association	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation.
Hardman, M., 9 th September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Blog for University College London Institute of Education
Hill, C., 23 rd September 2021	Teacher	Article in HWRK magazine.
Historical Association, 26 th August 2021	Subject Association	Article in response to the ITT Market Review
Hollis, E., 26 th July 2021	Union	Blog for National Association of School-Based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT)
Hollis, E., 3 rd August 2021	Union	Blog for National Association of School-Based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT)
Hollis, E., 12 th August 2021	Union	Blog for National Association of School-Based Teacher Trainers (NASBTT)
Hollis, E., 16 th September 2021	Union	Article for <i>Further Education News</i>
Hollis, E., 25 th September 2021	Union	Article for <i>Schools Week</i>
Incorporated Society of Musicians, Accessed on 20 th September	Subject Association	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Jessop, T. and Allen, M., University of Bristol, 14 th September 2021	Higher Education Institution	University of Bristol's response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Joint Letter to Minister for State for School Standards, 15 th July 2021	Unions, Teaching Membership Organisation	Letter in response to the ITT Market Review consultation
King's College London, Accessed 8 th September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Knight, J., 6 th July 2021	Politician	Article in <i>Times Educational Supplement</i>
Lamont, B., University of Cambridge, Accessed 8 th September 2021	Teacher	Blog for the University of Cambridge
Landy, J., University of Cambridge, Accessed 8 th September 2021	Teacher	Blog for the University of Cambridge
Lenon, B., University of Buckingham, 13 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution	University of Buckingham's response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Lock, S., 12 th September 2021	School Leader	Article for <i>Schools Week</i>
Lofthouse, R., Accessed 20 th September	Higher Education Institution	Podcast for <i>Rethinking Education</i>
Mearns, I., 20 th July 2021	Politician	Article for <i>Schools Week</i>
Million Plus, 20 th August 2021	Higher Education Institution Network	Collective response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Mountstevens, J., 24 th August 2021	School Leader	Article for <i>Schools Week</i>

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Author and date of publication	Stakeholder/Group	Nature of item
NASBTT, 12 th July 2021	Union	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
NASUWT The Teachers' Union, 8 th August 2021	Union	Blog in response to the ITT Market Review
NASUWT The Teachers' Union, 22 nd August 2021	Union	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
National Association for Primary Education (NAPE) 20 th July 2021	Professional Association	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review
National Association of Head Teachers, 15 th July 2021	Union	Article in response to the ITT Market Review
National Education Union, 6 th July 2021	Union	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review
Neil, P., and Bols, A., 25 th August 2021	Higher Education Institution	Article in <i>Wonkhe</i>
Peacock, A., 14 th July 2021	Professional Association	Article in <i>Times Educational Supplement</i>
Peacock, A. & Swift, D. 15 th July 2021	Professional Association	Position paper
Quickfall, A., 2 nd September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Article in <i>Nursery World</i>
Roach, P., 30 th August 2021	Union	Article for <i>Secondary Education</i>
Robertson, S., 27 th August 2021	Higher Education Institution	Blog for <i>Education International</i>
Robertson, S., 6 th September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Blog for <i>Education International</i>
Rolfe, C., 6 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution	Blog for Nottingham Institute of Education
Royal Geographical Society with IBG, Accessed 31 st August 2021	Subject Association	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Russell Group, 5 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution Network	Press release in response to the ITT Market Review
Russell Group, 20 th August 2021	Higher Education Institution Network	Response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Sheffield Hallam University, 22 nd September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Institutional Response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Sims, S., 6 th September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Article for <i>Schools Week</i>
Spendlove, D., University of Manchester, 30 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution	Individual blog response to the ITT Market Review
Thirunamachandran, R., 19 th September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Article in <i>Times Higher Education</i>
Tilin, J., 10 th September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Blog for University College London Institute of Education
University Alliance, Accessed 20 th September 2021	Higher Education Institution Network	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
UK Literacy Association (UKLA)	Subject Association	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET), 5 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution Network	Blog in response to the publication of the ITT Market Review
Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET), 5 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution Network	Letter to the Secretary of State for Education
Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET), 28 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution Network	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
University College London Institute of Education, 5 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution	Response to the publication of the ITT Market review
University College London Institute of Education, 18 th August 2021	Higher Education Institution	Institutional response to the ITT Market Review consultation
University of Brighton, Accessed 20 th September	Higher Education Institution	Guidance and information to support responding to the ITT Market Review consultation
University of Cambridge, 7 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution	Guidance and information to support responding to the ITT Market Review consultation

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Author and date of publication	Stakeholder/Group	Nature of item
University of Cambridge, 18 th August 2021	Higher Education Institution	Institutional response to the ITT Market review consultation
University of Greenwich, 18 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution	Institutional response to the ITT Market review consultation
University of Manchester, 21 st July 2021	Higher Education Institution	Institutional response to the ITT Market review consultation
University of Nottingham, 14 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution	Blog response to the ITT Market Review from the History ITE programme at University of Nottingham
University of Nottingham, 11 th August 2021	Higher Education Institution	Blog response to the ITT Market Review from the History ITE programme at University of Nottingham
University of Oxford, 5 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution	Press release in response to the publication of the ITT Market Review
University of Oxford 17 th August 2021	Higher Education Institution	Institutional Response to the ITT Market Review consultation
University of Warwick, 7 th September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Institutional Response to the ITT Market Review consultation
Virgo, G. and Robertson, S., University of Cambridge, 6 th July 2021	Higher Education Institution	Press release in response to the publication of the ITT Market Review
Williams, E., University of Cambridge, Accessed 8 th September 2021	Higher Education Institution	Blog for the University of Cambridge

that there should be opportunities for democratic discussion and debate for providers about matters that involve them.

Synthesis of the literature

The synthesis of the literature draws on the framework synthesis approach as described by Gough et al. (2012). Discussions between the authors were focused on exploring the items for associations and differences, and to consider what these themes meant in the context of ITE. Through recursive stages of review, discussion and synthesis three themes were identified. These themes are: (1) challenging the need and evidence for widespread change to the ITE sector, (2) questioning implementation of the review and (3) implications for teacher supply and teacher quality and, after a brief overview of the literature, these themes are shared in turn.

Findings

A range of stakeholders were represented in the literature considered including school leaders, teachers, unions, professional associations, subject associations, HEIs, and politicians (Table 1). Of the 75 items just over half (55%) were from HEIs and HEI networks, unions contributed the next largest group (16%) followed by subject associations (8%) and professional associations (8%). Teachers and school leaders each made up 4% of the literature. A small minority of items considered were broadly supportive of the ITT MRR (5%) with the vast majority, whilst accepting and sharing the government's commitment to improving the education sector, identify a range of concerns, which are now explored in the following three themes.

Challenging the need and evidence for widespread change to the ITE sector

A range of responses to the ITT MR rejected the premise that such a review is needed at this time (Association for Science Education, 2021; Association of School and College Leaders, 2021; British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2021a; Geographical Association, 2021) and argued that it should be halted (for example, University of Manchester, 2021). Thirunamachandran (2021) described the sense of “needless risk” that the ITT MR posed to the sector whilst others highlighted that the ITT MR used the terms “reform” and “review” interchangeably (Bingle, 2021). A central concern was that underpinning this set of proposals, there was a minimisation of the impact of systemic social injustice and structural inequality on the educational outcomes of children and young people:

There is a lack of acknowledgement of the true challenges of the wider socio-economic landscape . . . which unless recognised and dealt with will hinder the realisation of the aims and objectives of this review and at worst could exacerbate the levels of deprivation experienced across the country leading to greater disparity in educational outcomes for children and young people across the country (University Alliance, 2021).

Respondents noted that the ITT MR made flawed assumptions that ITT should have a curriculum (Brooks, 2021) and that teachers and schools are a broadly homogenous sector. Furthermore, respondents noted that there was a lack of nuance in terms of subject specialisms (for example, the Incorporated Society of Musicians, 2021) and age phases, such as the lack of consideration of the Early Years and Foundation Stage (EYFS) and transition phases into and beyond school (Sheffield Hallam University, 2021). Respondents argued that there was a lack of a rationale or “well-reasoned justification” for the ITT MR with the fundamental assumption made that beginning teachers are ill-prepared unproven (Peacock & Swift, 2021). Others noted the absence of evidence provided for key changes proposed, such as intensive school placements (Hollis, 2021a) and that in general, the evidence that was provided was “selective,” “partial” and “speculative” (BERA, 2021a). A key concern for HEIs was that, if implemented, the proposals would limit their academic freedom, increase prescription and reduce flexibility such that they might withdraw from the ITE sector altogether (see, for example, Virgo & Roberston, 2021).

Whilst respondents acknowledged the need for ITE to have robust Quality Assurance processes (Virgo & Roberston, 2021), others questioned whether there needed to be a more robust accreditation process than that provided by Ofsted (Peacock & Swift, 2021) and others challenged the way that some ITE providers have been judged by Ofsted (Daly, 2021; Ellis, 2021). Furthermore, some respondents ascribed the motivation for the ITT MR as indicative of policymakers’ desire to marginalise HEI involvement in initial teacher education, to increase state control or centralisation of the “market” (Cater, 2021; Ellis, 2021) and Mearns (2021) argued that the government seeks a “monopoly” rather than a “market” for ITE.

Questioning the implementation of the review

As well as challenging the premise for the ITT MR, respondents also challenged the implementation of the review itself, highlighting the brief period during which the review

was undertaken (six months) as well as raising concerns regarding the nature and timing of the associated public consultation. For example, the public were given only six weeks to respond, and this six-week period took place at the end of the summer term, at the end of an extremely demanding academic year. This approach does not appear to be consistent with the government's own consultation principles, which state, "consult stakeholders in a way that suits them ... When the consultation period spans all or part of a holiday period, consider how this may affect consultation and take appropriate mitigating action ..." (Cabinet Office, 2008, p.2). Respondents argued that the timing of the consultation period reduced the capacity for school leaders in particular, as well as stakeholders across the sector, to respond (Generate School Teaching Hub, 2021) and those who did were responding in the context of a "time of crisis" (National Association of Primary Education, 2021). Others highlighted their view that the public consultation was not an opportunity to provide meaningful engagement with stakeholders whilst others called for all responses to the public consultation to be published so that independent scrutiny was possible (BERA, 2021a). Instead, respondents called for a genuinely collaborative approach, which seeks to make incremental change to the sector (e.g. Geographical Association, 2021; Historical Association, 2021).

Implications for teacher supply and teacher quality

A key concern raised in response to the ITT MR was the risks posed to teacher supply (Hill, 2021), with no clear thinking in relation to the financial implications of the proposals (Hollis, 2021b; Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers, 2021). Many respondents raised concerns that HEIs (e.g. Virgo & Roberston, 2021) and schools (Association of School and College Leaders, 2021; Incorporated Society of Musicians, 2021) would withdraw from ITE, reducing the number and range of providers, which poses a significant risk to long-term teacher supply (BERA, 2021a). Some challenged the proposed shift to Teaching School Hubs and the yet to be established Institute of Teaching as principal sites for ITE when their capacity was not yet known (Hollis, 2021c) and that this could mean schools who have previously provided placements through long-standing partnerships would withdraw (Cater, 2021). Others questioned whether smaller schools, particularly primary schools, would be able to contribute placements in line with the ITT MR, which would further risk teacher supply (Bingle, 2021; Hollis, 2021c). Respondents also noted that the ITT MR had the potential to increase teacher workload (University of Greenwich, 2021) and add to burnout (Peacock & Swift, 2021) which could mean the loss of experienced mentors and further risk teacher supply. A further area of concern was the timescale for implementation of the ITT MR proposals, which was described as unrealistic and would place "significant strain" on the sector when the focus should be on "education recovery" during a time of turmoil associated with the global pandemic (Association of School and College Leaders, 2021). Others noted that the sector was already responding to significant change for example, the introduction of the ECF (DfE, 2019a) and the CCF (DfE, 2019b) and, as such, the ITT MR was at best, premature (Peacock & Swift, 2021).

A related concern was that of the risks the ITT MR posed to teacher quality (BERA, 2021a) as respondents highlighted the potential for the proposals to reduce teacher agency (University of Nottingham, 2021) and limit teachers' professional criticality

(Historical Association, 2021). Subject associations and others raised concerns about the quantity and quality of subject-specific learning and age-phase expertise that teachers would receive if the proposals were implemented (e.g. Geographical Association, 2021; Quickfall, 2021; United Kingdom Literacy Association, 2021) and that this posed an even greater risk to teachers of shortage subjects, such as science (Association of School and College Leaders, 2021). The role of universities in supporting the sector to understand the nature of teacher quality and how to achieve it was noted (BERA, 2021b; Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers, 2021) as was the role of universities in ensuring teacher education rooted in subject expertise, with the concern raised that the ITT MR proposals would result in a wholly generic experience (Hardman, 2021).

The prescriptive and restrictive approach to the timing and length of school placements as well as the homogeneous model of training and curriculum (University of Oxford, 2021) was seen as highly problematic as it would obstruct the current delivery of flexible and "highly personalised" and "innovative" curricula, which is "responsive to trainees" and schools' needs and based on the best available research (Jessop & Allen, 2021; Virgo & Roberston, 2021). Furthermore, the proposed model would arguably limit collaborative and research and/or enquiry-based dimensions of ITE programmes such as PGCEs (University of Manchester, 2021) and remove elements of civic engagement and work, which enhances equality, diversity and inclusion (Sheffield Hallam University, 2021). The role of HEIs in the ITE sector was viewed by many as a crucial part of enabling teacher quality and argued that recent teachers value the close involvement of universities in partnership with schools during their ITE (see, for example, Lamont, 2021). Respondents argued that the ITT MR could result in negative impacts for education departments in universities and for universities in general (King's College London, 2021; University of Manchester, 2021; 2021a). If implemented, the proposals would further marginalise university involvement in ITE, compromise autonomy and academic freedom, leaving HEIs questioning the nature of their continuing participation in ITE (Russell Group, 2021; University of Greenwich, 2021) or whether they leave the sector altogether (University of Cambridge, 2021; University of Oxford, 2021). Respondents suggested that the departure of universities would erode the intellectual basis of ITE and at the same time, others emphasised that teacher preparation programmes are centred on education – learning how to teach, rather than training (Brooks, 2021; Spendlove, 2021).

Having outlined the three main themes that emerged from the analysis, we now turn to discuss the implications of these for the ITE sector and draw out the potential value of developing VCoPs nationally and internationally to give voice to those at the forefront of teacher education in the context of policy review and reform.

Discussion and implications

Drawing on a recent case study from England during July – September 2021, this paper has described the responses of an ITE-based VCoP. This VCoP developed organically in response to the publication of the ITT MR in July 2021 and facilitated open cross-organisational discussions in response to a rapidly evolving situation. It consisted of a self-selecting and wide-ranging group of professionals from across the teacher education sector. As this was a self-selecting group accessible through the Twitter social media platform, it was not possible to establish a detailed composition of the group. However,

the VCoP included, for example, Directors/Heads of ITE in Higher Education Institutions, Education academics at different career stages, including Lecturers and Professors, as well as those from other parts of the sector, including school-based mentors and Education Consultants, and included national and international members. Members of the VCoP shared written pieces via social media, provided responses to members' written contributions, engaged in debate and discussion, and shared resources to support others to engage with and respond to the ITT MR public consultation. In these ways, members of this VCoP shared professional knowledge and provided support, which extended beyond organisational, subject and geographic boundaries to mobilise around an issue of national importance. VCoP allowed members to rapidly respond and engage in meaningful discussions about policy changes, which affected them. In particular, the use of social media facilitated opportunities for the ITE sector to work swiftly together during a time of extreme global turbulence, where physical movement and connections were marginalised due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The perceived marginalisation of stakeholders across the ITE sector, in particular those based in HEIs, to respond to recommendations, and the very short period of time for the sector to engage with the consultation process bred scepticism within the VCoP. Evidence from our analysis suggests there was sincere concern regarding how genuine the consultation process was given that responses to the consultation from across the sector, including those from school partners, were not fully accessed. During the public consultation period, some described the sector response as "histrionics" (Lock, 2021) and concerns raised by members of the VCoP were characterised as "myths" by the chair of the expert group who authored the ITT MR (Bauckham, 2021). Neither of these responses appear to have allayed wider scepticism across the VCoP and the ITE sector, rooted in concerns around the ongoing role and contribution of HEIs in the ITE sector being framed as a "problem" (Mutton et al., 2021). For example, within the items, we reviewed there were over 40 responses from HEIs, some of whom explicitly stated that ITT Market Review, if enacted, could lead to their withdrawal from the sector (University of Cambridge, 2021; University of Oxford, 2021). Threats that potential reforms could lead to a marginal role for HEIs can be traced back to the introduction of school-led models of ITE (Mutton et al., 2021). Echoing the observations of Rowe and Skourdoumbis (2019), it is evident that the VCoP is troubled that reforms could lead to a more prescriptive, less autonomous curriculum, and as such compromise the quality of HEI ITE provision (Stevens, 2010).

Our analysis of the literature presents a strong case for the government to respond to the recommendations of the ITT MR with caution. There was an overwhelming consensus from the literature analysed that should the recommendations be enacted, the ITE provision, which is currently acknowledged as being of high quality, by the DfE's own measures (Ofsted, 2015) could be compromised. As noted earlier, the ITE sector is recognised as a space of continued turbulence nationally and internationally, influenced by changes to government demands, requirements and perceived concerns regarding the quality of teaching and teacher training (Alexander & Bourke, 2021; Ellis et al., 2019; Fuller & Stevenson, 2019; Mutton et al., 2021). Whilst demands on the ITE sector are commonplace across the world, the extensive nature and pace of change to the ITE provision in England, as exemplified by the ITT Market Review, has led some to highlight England as an example of "what not to do" in other global contexts when undertaking ITE review and reform (Ellis, 2021).

Despite the significant concerns raised by the ITE sector, which are presented in this paper, the recommendations of the ITT MR have since begun to be implemented (DfE, 2021). There have been some minor amendments or “concessions” to the original proposals, but the key recommendations associated with (re-)accreditation for all providers and fidelity to the CCF remain firmly in place (DfE, 2021). For a sector committed to ensuring that ITE is of high quality, designed to meet the needs of pre-service teachers and regional communities, including during the challenging pandemic period, this has been a dispiriting context in which to be a teacher educator. The VCoP offers one way to express concerns and share perspectives and responses; however, we contend that there is much we need to do as a wider international collective to engage with debates regarding the education of pre-service teachers and therefore have a stronger voice and influence on policymakers. Online communities provide an avenue to reach a broader population beyond typical organisational boundaries. Access to a broad pool of expertise within a VCoP presents the opportunity for teacher educators to be engaged in policy debates nationally and internationally (Alexander & Bourke, 2021), and offers further opportunities for global collaboration with regard to ITE. As highlighted by Darling-Hammond (2017), we have much to learn from the varied experiences across the community and together, we can present counter narratives to the “accountability agenda” and prescriptive culture of ITE and instead, work towards a “culture of trust” (Sahlberg, 2007).

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