

On Learning from the Research Successful: how do teacher educators ever become established researchers?

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Introduction

Most Higher Education-based teacher educators, whether they work in teacher education for the early years, school or college sectors, come into such work from backgrounds in professional practice. Few – if any – enter Higher Education (HE) with doctorates or sustained experience of research, beyond practitioner action research. Some undertake part-time doctorates whilst working full-time; some tackle research engagement in other ways (for example, working on a large project with colleagues). But once teacher educators are working full-time in HE the complex factors which restrict the time and opportunities available for many of them to participate in research are well known (Furlong, 2007; Maguire, 2000; Murray, 2007; Sikes, 2006). These factors include the ‘turn to the practical’ in teacher education (Lawn and Furlong, 2010:7), the importance placed on experiential learning in the field, heavy teaching workloads and the demands of working in partnership with schools.

But despite these factors, some teacher educators *do* manage to become research active. Existing research does not identify in any detail how these individuals achieve this feat. Nor does it answer the questions of how and why some educators – and the teacher education communities to which they belong – develop thriving individual and communal research identities, whilst others struggle to reconcile any research and scholarly activities with intensive teaching and management commitments. These questions have particular importance at a time when research capacity building has become an imperative in education across the nation (ESRC, 2006).

The Research

Our on-going study for ESCalate / the Higher Education Academy, titled ‘*On Learning from the Research Successful*’ aims to address some of these omissions in existing research by exploring individual experiences in becoming research active and the perceived effectiveness of institutional strategies for developing research in HE-based teacher education. The research aims to contribute to theoretical knowledge of

how and why individual research profiles develop within particular socio-cultural settings in HE-based teacher education. It also aims to identify some of the complex relationships between individual biographies and dispositions, senses of agency, academic compliance, institutional change and aspirations and the shifting national scenarios for research and teaching in the field of teacher education across various time frames. These are currently under-researched areas in understanding research development in teacher education.

In terms of policy the study aims to add to the small existing body of knowledge on effective policies and support strategies, with a consideration of who benefits, how and why in terms of institutional capacity building initiatives. This is particularly important, given current national imperatives for research capacity building.

The research design specifies the use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of teacher educators. Stage one of the project – the implementation of the questionnaires – is now all but completed. This article is based on an initial analysis of that data. Full data analysis and further empirical work is scheduled for later this year.

Research methods

As indicated earlier, the aims of the study are: to explore the experiences of established researchers and the socio-cultural factors which support their development in the professional field of teacher education; to analyse, from the perspectives of these successful researchers, effective strategies for institutional research-capacity building; and to analyse the relevance of these findings to research capacity building in HE teacher education programmes.

The research is being conducted along ethical guidelines, provided by the British Educational Research Association (BERA). In consideration of the potentially sensitive nature of the data, all participants are given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

Stage one of the study uses questionnaires with a purposive sample of teacher educators across the four nations of the UK, all of whom met two inclusion criteria: firstly, they went through their research apprenticeships as part-time and mature students, juggling work teaching on ITE courses in Schools of Education; secondly,

they are now judged to be established or 'successful' researchers¹. In drawing up the sample group we used our own knowledge of the career histories of individual researchers within the field of education research. We also contacted research leaders and senior researchers in a wide range of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in order to access their insider knowledge of colleagues who met these two criteria.

Based on the sample list generated by these procedures, a non-coercive request to participate in the study and an email questionnaire was sent out to a purposive sample of 136 individuals who were judged to meet the selection criteria. Section one of the questionnaire was used to establish basic biographical details; section two used open text boxes to explore individual perceptions of the institutional settings in which the participants worked during their research apprenticeship, individual and institutional attitudes to research and useful support structures and relevant experiences whilst becoming research active.

Responses were received from 77 individuals representing a return rate of 56.6%, above the norm of 27% for electronic questionnaires. The majority of the responses were from teacher educators in England, reflecting the initial sample group and the disproportionately large number of HEIs in England compared to the other three nations. Despite attempts to target an appropriate sample group, the initial sample list proved to contain some inaccuracies in that 17 people (12.5 % of the sample) stated they did not meet the first eligibility criterion because they were not involved in teacher education during their research apprenticeships. Most of these people stated that they studied for doctorates full-time, either self-funded or on research studentships, before entering or returning to teacher education work. Three women specifically mentioned juggling part-time Ph.D. study with bringing up a young family. A very small number of respondents (n=2) stated that they worked in schools during their research apprenticeships. Five returns (3.6%) were blank, although the individuals had clearly intended to complete the questionnaire correctly.

We would acknowledge that email questionnaires of the type used have some distinct limitations. In this case, written responses in the questionnaires varied from

¹ This judgement of what counted as 'research successful' was based on our professional knowledge of the field of educational research and the individual's position in her/his university. Tempting as it initially seemed to use individual inclusion in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) of 2008 as a definition of 'research success', this proved to be an unreliable measure because of the different ways in which university departments of education played the 'game' of including or excluding individuals in their RAE entries.

brief statements (typically around two concise comments or phrases in response to each question posed) to long and detailed accounts. As in some email correspondence, some responses included data fragments or phrases rather than complete sentences, ungrammatical writing, a high number of contractions and informal phrases and some clear typing errors. In the extracts quoted here the grammar, data fragments and punctuation have been preserved verbatim, but spelling errors and other 'typos' have been corrected for clarity.

The biographical data in the first section of the questionnaire was entered into a computer database and analysed using basic content analysis procedures and simple statistical techniques; the more detailed data in the second section of the question was analysed using coding techniques based on a grounded theory approach to the analysis of qualitative data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This inductive process enabled unexpected elements of the data to be analysed. These initial codes were then refined by repeated analysis and used to define recurring themes and patterns. This process resulted in the creation of core categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Findings

Participants were asked how long they been working in teacher education when they began to undertake research. The responses indicate that there were no significant differences in relation to gender nor in terms of whether the educators were located in new or old universities. Many staff (n=47), irrespective of gender and institutional type began research when they had been in post for three years or less. An issue emerged, however, in terms of how participants answered this question which is worth noting. There were different interpretations about what constitutes research, and the point at which people stated that they began to engage with it was therefore somewhat 'fuzzy'. As one person said, 'Depends on what you call 'research'...I would say, [*I started*] in the first year of my teaching.'

In identifying our target sample we had tried to draw the parameters very tightly by specifying the key 'criterion for participating in the research' as:

you became research active (e.g. completed a Ph.D./Ed.D. and/or went through a different kind of induction/apprenticeship into research) whilst you were working full-time or part-time in teacher education.

Fortunately many respondents ignored this criterion with the consequence that some interesting data emerged. Seventeen people said they began research, often through the research component of Masters level work, before entering ITE. This would indicate that these courses are very significant in providing a launching point into research engagement:

It was 5 years before I started my Ph.D. which I would see as the 'real' start of my research career. I did some desk-based research for my M.A. though and some action research for a professional certificate whilst I was still in school teaching.

Also, participants spoke more about the nature of the research activity rather than being pre-occupied with the level of the qualification and it could be that focussing on this rather than encouraging recruitment to doctoral awards would encourage more people to continue developing their research skills. Even when not seen as the 'real' beginning, the focus on the research activity, which was often related to concerns as a teacher educator, formed a natural pathway that served to de-mystify the research process:

Depends on definition of research! I started doing action-based research projects almost from the outset of my employment (in HE), although I did not realise that was what I was doing! I simply wished to involve the student teachers more closely in working in the classroom to support teachers in initiatives in independent learning. I also wrote textbooks and articles for professional journals and books.

The second question was designed to explore why participants wanted to 'become a researcher'. The responses suggest that 'becoming a researcher' in the sense of pursuing a new identity was not how people understood their decisions to become research active, although that term did figure in the discourses employed by institutions to make distinctions between categories of staff (research active or not) for the purposes of allocating workloads. Becoming research active was, for most participants, tied to an intrinsic motivation such as 'developing understanding', 'curiosity' or 'personal interest and passion for subject'. One person felt 'a moral obligation on the part of those in Teacher Education to engage with the field, to put your ideas to colleagues'. A minority (n=4) claimed instrumental motivations such as

'career advancement' and 'ambition', and three cited external pressure in the form of contractual requirements or commands from senior management, for example, '*...the Dean told me to publish or perish*'.

Asked whether there was any institutional/departmental pressure to become research active, 75% of the participants from old or pre-'92 universities said yes, compared with 45% from the new or post-'92 sector. But many of these people – across both types of universities – took issue with the word 'pressure' and preferred to describe institutional efforts to support research activity as '*encouragement*'. This benign culture seemed to be more prevalent in the post-'92 sector, whilst in the pre-'92 universities pressure was described in terms of '*contractual obligation*', '*implicit threats to job security*' and '*pressure for RAE 08 was of the form of being shamed*'.

The differences between differing university cultures was experienced first hand by this participant who started work in an HE college:

At first there was no expectation to do research and I was actually discouraged. When we merged with the university this changed ... It was made clear at departmental meetings that professional activities were irrelevant and that all that counted was academic research. Given these messages, I changed tactics, albeit somewhat reluctantly, as I had enjoyed working with and writing for teachers.

Questioned about how they got started in research, the majority of participants said they became research active through enrolling on a higher degree often beginning with an MA (although one said '*I loved my PGCE and knew that this would be the route I wanted to take*'). Working with colleagues on publications or research grants was also very important in people becoming 'hooked'. In an attempt to encourage people to be explicit about what helped them to become research active, we had asked about the support structures available to them. Four participants (three from pre '92 and two from post '92 universities) reported that there were none. In other cases a range of provision existed including research groups, courses, mentoring, pump priming grants, financial support for doctoral fees and sabbaticals or other arrangements providing research time.

Strong research cultures were judged to be important in achieving success, as well as the support of friends and colleagues. Family members were largely absent in the

responses except one acknowledgement of 'my wife' and one of 'my dad'. One person from an old university experienced 'monitoring, not mentoring' and went on to make a distinction between 'rhetoric and reality' in relation to support structures:

... [name] University certainly has plenty of systems that appear to support people in research. I guess these are designed to look good during external scrutiny. However, in my experience the reality was different. Although there were several meetings that folk had to attend where lots of well meaning words were spoken by management, when I needed help it was never forthcoming. I was assigned a research mentor whom I never met and sent me two emails over [three] years. I soon got the impression that 'you're on your own Jack', despite all the top-down rhetoric.

This comment and the one below both show the importance of mentors taking their role seriously and of what can happen when senior staff change jobs:

Not exactly pressure perhaps, but it was actively encouraged, funding available for conferences, workshops in research methods, grant applications, writing for publication, excellent leadership from management. NB Please note use of PAST tense!

Participants mentioned senior staff including professors and heads of department as the people who supported them the most, followed by colleagues. Heads of department were seen as pivotal in allocating time and other resources for research, and professors were often seen as 'not scary' but 'inspirational', 'kind' and 'patient', often behaving as 'first among equals' rather than hierarchically. There were of course exceptions:

I registered to do a part-time Ph.D. in about 1989 but 20 years on I am still waiting to be invited to a tutorial by my assigned supervisor, Professor [name], also at that time, the Dean. The Assistant Dean, (Professor [name]) did his utmost to restrict my activities to teaching.

Not everybody experienced a collaborative environment. One person thought that 'it would be fantastic if a senior member of staff would be willing to write with someone new'. However, he continues:

The way things are in the academic world that kind of generosity is rare. It appears to be dog eat dog out there and, in fact, often you have to keep your research interests under wraps for fear of having them stolen from you! One of the first and hardest rules I learned is that no-one wants to steal your teaching from you but there are plenty who would like to do exactly that with your research!

Almost everyone mentioned lack of time as the biggest difficulty in the early stages of becoming a researcher. Many respondents noted the difficulty of juggling the teaching commitments of ITE with demands made by research. The difficulties emanated from two main sources. Some respondents found it hard to claim research time even where it had been allocated, because of a departmental ethos of prioritising the preparation of high quality new teachers who would go on to impact positively on children:

... [difficulties in the early stages were] extreme pressures on time brought about by ITT programmes and their inspections and the demands of fulfilling the (infinite) demands of the students. This last was (is) especially hard to avoid ...; the problem was seemingly insoluble because there was always more to do, the task impossible to complete, and the consequence of failure as a teacher educator was very high: poor standards of teaching damaging children's life chances; this was the way that some looked upon it, and that was very hard to argue against.

Added to this were issues of identity which created what one person described as 'occupational schizophrenia (academic or teacher)':

... juggling teaching prep and heavy contact hours and assessment visits alongside wider reading and writing, teaching priorities always displaced writing ones because of my socialisation into secondary teaching and strong identity as a teacher.

If personal identities and institutional priorities squeeze time available for research, several women and one man experienced further pressures in trying to balance teaching and research with family life, particularly where this involved young children.

Finally, 'self doubt' or lack of confidence in the early stages of becoming research active was reported by four participants. Sometimes lack of interest and support seemed to be internalised as lack of ability on the part of new researchers, but in the case below the effect of negative feedback on an article submitted to an academic journal was particularly damaging at an early career stage:

... when I first began working in HE I was writing at masters level. That, as I soon discovered was far removed from what would be acceptable to a good journal. I sent a few things in early in my career and had them rejected often bluntly and sometimes unkindly. Academic reviewers are not always gentle when they reject something. As a new academic ... I was on my own and faced with this kind of rejection I decided that I probably just wasn't good enough to publish (which I wasn't!). I didn't try again for a couple of years because I was so stung by some of the comments--I felt a real failure. I only had a go again when I started work on the PhD when I decided to try to kill two birds with one stone. That helped. Once I got one article published I began to understand the 'game' better and was less sensitive to harsh criticism. Getting work accepted for publication is a bit of game I'm afraid and I am a little bit cynical about it.

Unfortunately, this participant may well discover that being academically savaged by anonymous reviewers is something of an occupational hazard that is not confined to the early stages of an academic career.

In order to overcome their difficulties, our sample group adopted a variety of strategies which largely amounted to changing themselves rather than the context. This may have been by dint of becoming more 'pig-headed', more 'determined' or 'just keeping going', or by 'moving out of ITE' and into other more 'research friendly niches' within the department or university or by 'restricting holidays' and 'working long hours'. This person managed to complete her doctorate by:

... discovering that I could write best at 5 a.m. till 7.30 a.m. ... writing and coding interviews in winceyette! I'd often do 3 hrs work before going into office and uni to teach and supervise.

Others went to a counsellor or read self-help or time-management literature. However, for some, these strategies came at a cost of 'huge sacrifices in terms of

social life ... ; for example, I researched every Saturday. This left Saturday evening and Sunday for my partner. In another case:

Now, having said how fortunate I was in my work life, I have failed to mention that my marriage broke down when I was doing my masters degree, I have no children and I used to work seven days a week! I enjoyed this experience but it does indicate that something has to give somewhere!

But for the majority of respondents, whilst the personal costs may have been high, the benefits of becoming successful researchers have been more than an ample reward, as the number of 'victory narratives' in our data show.

Next steps

With analysis of the questionnaires almost complete, we now plan to conduct in-depth interviews with a broadly representative sample of ten of these teacher educators. These interviews will explore in more depth the research histories and learning journeys of the individuals as they became established researchers. Like the questionnaires, the interviews will also include a focus on the support structures available and perceived to be useful during the research journey.

As a final note to this article, in the questionnaires we also asked our respondents to provide advice to a new colleague working in teacher education and commencing a research career. Respondents' answers were remarkably similar – and we reproduce the advice here to encourage any readers who may be travelling on their personal 'research journey'.

Firstly, our sample said *'jump in early'*, and *'make it part of your mind-set from day one - it's very difficult to develop the necessary identity later on'*. Secondly, they advised *'find something you are passionate about'*, *'choose an area of interest that personally fascinates and is compelling'*, *'go from your interest base'* because *'it is important to be strongly committed to research – to be 'burned-up' to get to the bottom of issues'*. Thirdly, they counsel developing researchers to *'fight for'*, *'insist on'*, *'be ruthless in terms of carving out time specifically designated for research'*, *'plan your research time like a military campaign'* and *'treat research with the same commitment as you do your other responsibilities – block out the time in your diary and treat it as you would teaching time i.e. non-negotiable'*. Fourthly, and seen as an essential part of the support network for many, they advise finding other people to

work with, either 'more experienced and established researchers whom you like' or 'colleagues who share the interest'. Finally, participants counselled new researchers to 'access other forms of support by taking advantage of any support systems going' and to 'avoid at all costs the prevalent work ethic that demands an excess of your time and presence for clerical and managerial tasks and rewards you only with guilt!' Easier said than done, we hear you saying.

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