

# THE WORK OF TEACHER EDUCATION

## Research Plan

### Summary

The project aims to provide original insights into the institutional conceptualisations of teacher education as academic work and the practical activities undertaken by this category of higher education worker. The study will have relevance for the organisational development of HE Education departments and for the learning of teachers within them.

### Aims, distinctiveness and methods

#### AIMS

1. To build on existing research into the discursive construction of teacher education as work in England (Ellis et al) by extending to the Scottish context and developing a methodology that integrates the analysis of participants' spoken and written discourse with the study of their practical activities, and the material artefacts that mediate these activities;
2. To gain an understanding of the material conditions of teachers' educators' work by conducting an in-depth, qualitative investigation of a small sample of university-based teacher educators in Scotland and England;
3. On the basis of this data, to make some cross-cultural comparisons that might reveal the historical evolution of the different teacher education systems and their potentials for development, particularly in terms of student teachers' learning.

#### RELATIONSHIP TO LEARNING AND TEACHING IN EDUCATION

The project will open up for discussion the nature of teacher education as work in the higher education sector, note similarities and differences in both practical activities and conceptualisations and generate data that will be useful in setting a 21st century agenda for the development of teacher education.

#### SIMILAR PROJECTS AND DISTINCTIVENESS

There is a small but growing literature on the induction/identity-transformation of new teacher educators, some of it funded by ESCalate (eg. Murray 2006, Boyd et al 2006; also Murray 2008, Koster et al 2008, Diamond 1988). Policy-oriented work is also relevant in addressing the 'contribution' of higher education to teacher learning (e.g. Ellis 2010, Furlong 2000). There is also some interesting American research concerning the history of the 'education professoriate' (eg. Labaree 2004, Ducharme 1993) and the growing shortage of suitably qualified and experienced university-based teacher educators in the US (eg. Twombly et al 2006). Our proposed study is distinctive both in its materialist/cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) perspective, its analytic focus on teacher educators' practical activities and discourse - and what this analysis might tell us about student (teacher) learning.

## TEAM EXPERTISE

Ellis's Subject Knowledge and Teacher Education was nominated for the 2007 NCTE Meade award and his co-edited volume (with Edwards and Smagorinsky) *Cultural-Historical Perspectives on Teacher Education and Development* (Routledge, 2010) will be the first internationally to use CHAT to explore teacher education concepts. McNally was director of the ESRC-funded 'Enhanced Competence-Based Learning in Early Professional Development' project and co-editor (with Blake) of *Improving Learning in a Professional Context* (Routledge, 2010). McNicholl's recent work has taken a sociocultural approach to studying professional knowledge in secondary school departments. The project would be based in the Oxford Centre for Sociocultural and Activity Theory Research that has extensive experience of supporting and monitoring externally-funded projects.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: What do advertisements, job descriptions and person specifications for university-based teacher education positions in Scotland reveal about how teacher education work is conceptualised at the institutional level?

RQ2: Do institutional conceptualisations of teacher education work vary between Scotland and England and, if so, how?

RQ3: What are the daily practical activities of a small sample of teacher educators and how do these teacher educators talk about their work?

RQ4: How do material artefacts (e.g. texts such as Standards frameworks, observation forms, course handbooks; new technologies such as white boards, discussion forums, etc.) mediate these practical activities and shape the interactions between teacher educators and students?

RQ5: Within the sample, what differences are apparent in the kinds of learning possible for students in the various teacher education settings studied?

## METHODOLOGY

The project will employ a range of qualitative methodologies. Theoretically, the project will be informed by sociocultural and CHAT perspectives that seek to understand the relationship between language and thinking, the role of artefacts in the mediation of human activity and the emergence of individual development within cultural and historical channels of social practice.

A set of advertisements, job descriptions and person specifications will be collated representing all vacancies for university-based teacher educators in Scotland for an initial period in 2010. These texts will be subject to a form of sociocultural discourse analysis to reveal the ways in which language is used to conceptualise teacher education as work at the institutional level (RQ1).

The results of this discourse analysis will be compared with the results of an analysis of an English sample collated during the previous year (work already undertaken by Ellis, McNicholl and Pendry) (RQ2).

A small sample of 12 university-based teacher educators will be constructed to incorporate the following dimensions: i. representation of institutions in Scotland and England; ii. participants with a range of experience in teacher education work (e.g. those in their first or second year; those with 10 or more years of experience); iii. participants from primary, secondary and FE backgrounds; iv. participants from a range of institutions as indicated by research activity (i.e. outcomes of RAE 2008).

Each participant will be telephone interviewed at the outset to elicit self-reports of their daily activities and also to reveal their conceptualisations of teacher education as work (RQ3). Aspects of life history research methodologies will be used to analyse this set of interview data (e.g. Mandelbaum 1973).

Subsequently, each participant will be asked to participate in data generation by uploading visual images, sound files and written text that provides both a work log and a representation of the ways in which selected material artefacts mediate their daily practical activities. An on-line research tool will be developed to facilitate this process (RQs 4, 5).

Each participant will be observed at work (work-shadowed) by a member of the research team for a short period (to be identified according to common criteria) (RQs 3, 5).

The participants will also be interviewed at the end of the observation visit, face-to-face. The focus of this interview will be on their accounts of the work observed, how it reflects their conceptualisations of the various kinds of activities undertaken and also will explore their narrative accounts of the data they have uploaded via the on-line research tool (RQs 3, 4, 5).

The final meetings of the participants will be framed as participatory data analysis workshops that employ a variation of the Developmental Work Research (DWR) methodology associated with Professor Yrjö Engeström at the University of Helsinki. DWR involves researchers selecting segments of data for participants to analyse using the tools of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). Transcripts of these workshops are then analysed using discourse techniques. Ellis has previous experience of this methodology.

The combination of close analysis of spoken and written discourse with systematic observation of practical activities and interpretation of material and semiotic artefacts potentially enables a multi-faceted understanding of the research problem.

### **Milestones: summarise what you intend to do and when**

#### **MILESTONES**

The project is planned in three phases. The first phase will also include necessary preparation such as securing administrative assistance (e.g. for weekly collation of job description data) and more detailed project management planning.

Phase 1 (March – April 2010): Securing administrative assistance; publicising project prior to recruitment of sample; development of on-line research tool; first research team meeting; collation of Scottish job description data from web sources (e.g. jobs.ac.uk) begins.

Phase 2 (April – August 2010): Collation and analysis of Scottish job description data completed; recruitment and construction of sample; interviews and observations (work-

shadowing) of sample commenced; participants' use of on-line research tool commenced; analysis of data on-going.

Phase 3 (August 2010 – March 2011): Interviews and observations completed and analysed; participants' use of on-line research tool completed and analysed (and, subject to ethical clearance, selection published on web); two dissemination conferences held (Scotland and England); participatory evaluation completed; final report completed; one article submitted to a peer-reviewed journal; summary prepared for BERA *Research Intelligence*; proposal in preparation for ESCalate conference or Teacher Education Advancement Network event.

#### RESPONSIBILITIES

Ellis will coordinate project overall, including responsibility for liaison with and accountability to ESCalate. McNally will coordinate all research activities in Scotland, including supervising administrative assistance (split 50/50 between partners). Ellis, McNally and McNicholl will all participate in data generation with the research sample. An element of cross-national data generation will also be planned (i.e. one English researcher working in Scotland and McNally at one site in England). McNicholl will monitor expenditure and Ellis will supervise the work of the consultant in preparation of online research tool. A significant proportion of the funding sought would therefore be allocated to travel and subsistence – for researchers to make site visits in Scotland and England and to bring the research participants together for meetings/the conferences.

#### Outcomes and dissemination and evaluation

While there is often an assumption of similarity between the kinds of teacher education work undertaken across the higher education sector, and although when teacher educators meet they often identify commonalities at a personal level, previous research such as the ESRC demographic review of the social sciences (Mills et al 2006) and our own (Ellis et al, submitted) suggests significant institutional differences. In addition, the policy trajectories within the devolved UK also indicate increasing national variations in the practical activities of teacher education and how these are conceptualised (Menter et al 2006). The proposed study seeks to open out these questions for discussion by the widest possible constituency, including teacher educators themselves, the departments or professional schools in which they are based, the higher education sector and employers generally, UCET, the TDA (in England) and other professional and policy stake-holders. To that end, the project aims to achieve the following outcomes:

#### RESEARCH OUTCOMES

1. A better understanding of the discursive construction of teacher education as work at the institutional level in Scotland and England, enabling possible cross-national comparisons.
2. A unique data-set that will enable a detailed understanding of the practical activities and material conditions of a small sample of teacher educators' work in a variety of institutional settings across two countries of the UK;
3. A greater awareness of the potential for the organisational development of teacher education, particularly in terms of promoting student teachers' learning.

#### OUTPUTS AND DISSEMINATION

Within the time-frame of the project, the research and professional outputs and means of dissemination are:

1. Two participatory data analysis conferences (one each in Scotland and England) which we would organise in collaboration with UCET and the BERA Teacher Education SIG, and with the support of the ESCalate grant and, possibly, its staff. We shall invite members of the

BERA SIG to act as critical friends and to lead an evaluative response to the research at each conference. The conferences will be framed as participatory data analysis workshops that employ a variation of Developmental Work Research. The conferences would provide a cross-national opportunity for the exploration and clarification of teacher education as academic work and of the kinds of learning (pre-service and continuing) that arise from teacher educators' practical activities. We have included funding for these conferences in our budget and see them as both key professional outputs and means of dissemination. Copies of presentations and responses would be made available for publication on the ESCalate website. These conferences would not preclude further participation by the research team in ESCalate and/or TEAN organised events.

2. The project team anticipate the submission of at least one article in a relevant peer-reviewed, international journal (e.g. *Journal of Teacher Education*) within the time-frame of the project that would come to the attention of research students, researchers and academic staff in UK institutions. Great potential exists for related submissions to other journals and conferences, for example, those of the Society for Research in Higher Education. The submission of an article to a well-established, peer-reviewed journal is seen as an essential aspect of project evaluation. A summary of the research would also be prepared for BERA's *Research Intelligence*.