

Title: Masters of the game: teacher educators and the M level PGCE

Author: Dr Lynne Graham-Matheson

Abstract

This paper reports on a study of teacher educators at one university in south east England, exploring their perceptions and experiences of the M level PGCE. Although the tutors had concerns about Masters level credits in postgraduate initial teacher education, most felt that it has the benefit of moving trainee teachers towards critically evaluating and reflecting on theory and practice. Many of the tutors also felt that it had encouraged them to be more rigorous and evidence-based in their own teaching. The main concerns expressed concerned teaching at Masters level where tutors themselves do not have Masters level qualifications, and assessing work at Masters level. Other issues were time and workload, and concerns for students who might struggle with Masters level work or feel they have 'failed' if they do not achieve Masters level credits.

The results of the study were originally presented at the ESCalate conference in May 2009.

Keywords: PGCE; Masters level; teacher educators; initial teacher education; trainee teachers.

Introduction

In 1999, 29 countries including the UK, signed the Bologna Declaration on the European Space for Higher Education. The Declaration was a pledge by those countries to reform their higher education (HE) systems in a convergent way. A key proposal was that HE systems should be based on two main cycles – undergraduate and graduate. Access to the graduate cycle required successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years, with the second cycle leading to a Masters or doctorate degree. Following this the National Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ, 2001) stated that although a graduate certificate or diploma might have some Masters (M) level outcomes, the title 'postgraduate' could only be used for an award where most or all of the outcomes were assessed at M level. This led to problems for institutions offering the PGCE as a teaching qualification – despite being known as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education it was not a Masters level programme, although some providers did offer some Masters level components.

It was decided, therefore, that from 2007 the PGCE would become two qualifications – the Postgraduate Certificate in Education and the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education - but it soon became clear that institutions were implementing the change in different ways, and with differing degrees of readiness. The Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) does not set out a curriculum for teacher education, nor does it dictate how programmes should be organised. This led to institutions offering a range of Masters credits for PGCE programmes (although 60 credits seems to be the most common), with some offering both qualifications and others offering only one. In some institutions students had to opt for one programme or the other, in others it was determined on the level of assessment.

Concerns were raised that turning the PGCE into a non-postgraduate course would add weight to the ongoing debate about the changes in teaching due to factors including the introduction of competence-based training, the growth of State intervention and the movement away from university-based training (e.g.

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Ozga, 2000; Bottery and Wright, 2000; Furlong, 2000, 2002). It is argued that these changes led to teaching becoming 'de-professionalised', with teachers having less opportunity to exercise professional judgement, autonomy and reflection. Wray (2006) suggests that requiring trainee teachers to produce evidence of acquiring particular competences focuses course content onto practical outcomes, so that what trainees are able to do is more significant than how they think or how deep their knowledge of issues in schools and classrooms might be.

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

Although, as Jackson and Eady (2008) point out, the consideration of M level provision in the PGCE came from a technicality, correcting an anomaly which had been used without question for years and which became apparent after the Bologna Declaration, the intention to move teaching to a Masters level provision is evidenced by *The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures* (DCSF, 2007:4.24).

To help fulfil our ambitions for all children, and to boost the status of teaching still further, we now want it to become a masters-level profession.....Our new

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goal will be for all teachers to achieve a Masters qualification as a result over the course of their career.

This has led to the introduction of the new Masters in Teaching and Learning (MTL) in some pilot areas and schools in 2010.

Introducing the MTL programme builds on the 'new professionalism' agenda developed with stakeholders. This respects teachers as highly skilled individuals who make judgements and exercise professional autonomy in the classroom with clear frameworks of accountability, as leaders of teaching and learning and as learners who engage in professional development throughout their careers. (TDA, 2009)

This moves teachers on from simply meeting competences or standards into autonomous professionals and is in accord with the FHEQ (2001) definition of Masters level, which calls for 'a critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, much of which is at, or informed by, the forefront of their academic discipline, field of study, or area of professional practice'.

Despite the move towards M level work, the competences that teachers have to meet have become less concerned with research and evidence base over recent years. Examining the changes to teacher training, Wray (2006) notes that the Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) set out in 1998 (DfEE, 1998) required that primary teachers 'are aware of, and know how to access, recent inspection evidence and classroom relevant research evidence on teaching primary pupils in the subject, and know how to use this to inform and improve their teaching.' The 2002 version of the Standards does not mention research, amending this requirement to 'They are able to improve their own teaching, by evaluating it, learning from the effective practice of others and from evidence' (TDA, 2002:S1.7). The current Standards, effective from 2007 and revised the following year (TDA, 2008) do not specifically mention research, stating only that teachers should

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Have a creative and constructively critical approach towards innovation, being prepared to adapt their practice where benefits and improvements are identified (Q8).

As Wray (2006:143) suggests

Changing official requirements for teacher preparation courses also significantly downgrades the place of research findings in the process. It is hard to resist the impression that the initial preparation of teachers has moved towards being an activity which is research and theory free, with an emphasis instead upon the dissemination of 'effective practice' (even though there is little attempt to define what 'effective' means). The idea of beginning teachers being asked to critique the effective practice and the evidence they are meant to draw upon is out of kilter with the tenor of the preparation process.

Wray wrote before the changes were made to the PGCE but asserted that beginning teachers were less well prepared to develop their own theories of teaching and learning and less able to resist direction from central government. He concluded that if we have moved towards a teaching work force that does not, or cannot, constantly question what they do in classrooms then all of us – schools, pupils, teacher educators - are the poorer. The move towards a PGCE with M level components suggests that trainee teachers may be caught between the constraints of ensuring their practice meets the Standards for QTS, while at the same time needing to develop research skills and criticality in order to achieve M level credits.

This study set out to look at the way in which teacher educators in one university perceived the changes to the PGCE.

Background

This study was undertaken within the Postgraduate Initial Teacher Education Department at a Higher Education Institution which is one of the largest providers of teacher education in the country. It was founded in 1962 to meet the needs of church schools during a time of teacher shortage and was the

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first teacher training college founded by the Church of England during the 20th century. It was awarded full university title in 2005. The University has over 15,500 students (2007/8) - almost half are part-time and over a third are aged over 30. In 2007/8 there were 572 successful PGCE students, 12.3% of the University's students, as well as many others studying initial teacher training, continuing professional development (CPD) and postgraduate courses related to education and teaching.

The study was funded as part of the research informed teaching initiative¹ and was initially intended to support a project for teacher educators undertaking research alongside their PGCE students. In common with other institutions, this institution had previously offered Masters level work in the PGCE but the division of the PGCE into Postgraduate Certificate and Professional Graduate Certificate led to concerns from tutors, many of whom had recently come from schools and did not have a Masters degree themselves. As it became evident that some teacher educators were concerned about the M level components of the PGCE, the emphasis of the study changed to look at their views and experiences of the PGCE, with the aim of feeding back to programme leaders so that they could support their teams. An output from the early part of the study was a brief guide to critical reading and writing, intended for PGCE students but also to support tutors.

Methodology

The study made use of mixed methodology with discussion groups, a questionnaire survey distributed to all tutors in the department and interviews with a sample of tutors. The discussion groups took place during a departmental development day in May 2008, organised to consider the issues around the M level PGCE. Notes were taken at the meeting by the researcher. The questionnaires were also handed out at that meeting (and emailed to

¹ In November 2006 the Higher Education Academy launched the *Teaching Informed and Enriched by Research* Initiative. Higher education institutions could submit applications for funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England for three years, until 2008/9, for this initiative. At the University represented in this paper academics could bid for funding to support projects.

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those not present) to collect data in a more structured way and also to allow considered and anonymous (if desired) responses. Twenty-six completed questionnaires were returned, said by the Department to be a high response rate, from respondents with a range of roles and experience. Six semi-structured interviews were carried out with volunteers. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary.

The findings

Discussion groups

The discussion groups presented tutors with the opportunity to explore the issues around Masters level work within the PGCE. The views expressed were not negative, but they were not always very enthusiastic either. There was general agreement that it is important to have trainee teachers engaging at M level because M level skills of critical reading, writing and analysis are important, but achieving M level credits is less important. One question was: when are students ready for Masters level work? Is there a particular stage, and would this be when they are past the stage when they want 'tips for teaching'? An important issue was what does it mean to read critically - how can students be encouraged to write about their writing, and think about their thinking? Being able to define critical analysis was a concern for some tutors, with discussion about whether this is a transferable skill and whether students have to be disposed towards it. It was thought that this would be particularly difficult for maths and science graduates, as they may not have experience of the kind of writing and analysis required.

There was a focus on how tutors could work with the M level PGCE components, with particular concerns about increased workload and M level assessment. There was seen to be real tension in the M level PGCE – a traditional Masters is about independent study, so putting this into a taught course is a problem. Irrespective of M level the role of the university part of the PGCE is about questioning and being critical, which differs from what students do in school. This led to a comment that, particularly for primary trainees, there is a real variation between schools, both in the support and

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training they give trainees and the views of headteachers around M level, which can have an impact on trainees' work.

Questionnaire survey

The questionnaire asked about initial responses to the changes to the PGCE and whether these views had altered over time. Sixteen of the respondents said they had initially felt positive or very positive and only one felt negative – over the year, seven had become more positive, two more negative and the rest about the same. Ten respondents said they were excited by the challenge, eight were a little apprehensive and seven said they were in need of more training. As one tutor said:

On an individual basis I felt that I was able to help some students focus on something that they were interested in, but didn't know how to narrow it down. This was a brief tutorial but there wasn't enough time and some hadn't got a clue where to start! I feel that the comments I made on the professional investigations were considered and constructive – they took me ages to mark! My conversations and meetings with the second marker were of a great help

Particular concerns for tutors were the need to change their teaching to encourage students working at M level (critical reading and writing), supporting students' writing, developing students' understanding and engagement with appropriate methodology and methods, and the extent to which M level learning could be integrated into the PGCE. Some tutors were concerned about their own lack of experience with methodology and analysing data, and it was felt that the need for an emphasis on critical engagement and reflection, and the requirements of this, were not clear to students.

I think the session devoted to the professional investigation (PI) tried to cover too much at one time. For some who weren't bothered by the writing at M level, I'm not sure how useful it was. I think it was all quite daunting. Also, the students were more concerned about their teaching practice at that time so

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perhaps hadn't really thought about it yet. I was not happy with their whole preparation for the PI – I don't know whether that was my fault.

Significant concerns were raised around time and assessment. There was felt to be a need for more time for tutors to work with students, particularly weaker students and those who were not enthusiastic about working at M level, and for supporting students with skills such as analysing data. Tutors wanted more time to work collaboratively and to build a shared understanding across tutor teams, as well as for discussion and reflection; it would be useful to have more time to discuss M level with each other and also with more experienced colleagues or 'experts'.

Still excited about potential, more excited about reality, still worried about consistency and about quality and support for tutors

Assessment was a particular concern, in terms of ensuring consistency of judgments and being clear about the dividing line between undergraduate and postgraduate level work. Several tutors said they had run one to one tutorials to support students, and had given detailed feedback on all the assignment plans submitted. There was seen to be a need for students studying practical subjects – e.g. art, DT, PE, ICT, music – to be able to submit work that could be assessed at M level which was not in an essay format.

There was a view amongst a number of tutors that many trainee teachers are concerned only with working through their training and gaining QTS, seeing their priorities as assignments and the logistics of getting to placements, and are not very interested in M level credits.

To separate M level from Level 3 is a focus on outcome. We should be engaging our students to read and write as well as they can and therefore this support should be available for students working at Level 3 too. There needs to be some consensus as to what the M level component is for ... I would

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suggest it is to help students to become better teachers but I don't think this is shared amongst students?

Some tutors expressed concern about those students who do not achieve M level credits and so might feel they have 'failed', despite having completed their training and achieved QTS. There was a view expressed that perhaps M level was not an appropriate pathway for many of this university's students, who do not necessarily have 'good' degrees or are mature students who might not have studied for some time.

There is a negative effect on students who only achieve Level 3 and thereby get a professional certificate

Interviews

Being interviewed was voluntary, and partly because of this but also due to circumstances of timing, all the interviewees were programme leaders; very senior tutors with considerable experience and Masters degrees. The more reflective and positive nature of their comments seems likely to result from this, but possibly also the fact that the interviews came later and thus the PGCE with M level had been running longer.

Some of the responses in the interviews echoed those in the survey. The interviewees were particularly concerned about the effect of M level work on the less academically able students or those who graduated some time ago, suggesting that perhaps this has implications for student recruitment. It was thought to be an unnecessary pressure, 'setting students up to fail', with too much emphasis on gaining credits and not enough on the benefits and deeper learning of M level work, although it was seen as an improvement that all students now undertook the same work - previously at this university students had to 'opt in' to M level credits.

When asked whether students were engaging with critical reading and writing, not surprisingly the views expressed were that this varied, depending on

background and experience and whether students had come straight from university. It was thought that the students generally found it difficult to take a critical perspective, not just at M level - students needed to learn how to disagree with each other in seminars. There was a view that working at M level should be bridging the gap between theory and practice, not widening it. One tutor considered the course to be too front loaded, meaning that trainees are more concerned about how to get to their placement school rather than thinking about their assignments - they should have more time in school before the first assignment so they feel more settled.

Generally the interviewees felt that M level credits added value to the PGCE programme – that before there had been ‘a sort of anti-intellectualism’ whereas now trainees have to develop the ability to question, criticality, reflection, research skills. Working at M level was thought to be particularly important for primary trainees, who need the confidence and skills to question policies and initiatives.

There was an issue about the perception of schools, with a gap between theory and practice and some headteachers not enthusiastic, even negative, about M level work, being more concerned about trainees’ ability to teach. There was also a problem in that some school mentors were not able to see the point of M level and were not very supportive, generally where they did not themselves have a Masters degree, leading to issues in trainee support. Some schools had been very supportive, for example if a trainee’s research fits with school improvement plans, although others say trainees need to concentrate on being a newly qualified teacher (NQT) and school work. There was thought to be a dilemma, when different sorts of knowledge were being prized at school and at university.

The effect of the PGCE with M level components on teacher educators was thought to depend entirely on experience – more experienced tutors with a Masters qualification themselves were excited by the development and it had led to more discussion and debate.

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I have enjoyed teaching it and feel it has contributed to my professional development.

Others felt threatened and anxious, particularly if they did not have a Masters qualification or experience of working at this level (this university has a mandatory course for all staff who teach at Masters level). It has led to increased workload, particularly with the need for more tutorials and to double mark essays and ensure consistency of judgement, and it was thought that more time was needed in programme teams for discussion. One suggestion was that a 'buddy scheme' with inexperienced tutors paired with the more experienced would provide support.

The interviewees all said that the changes had affected how they teach. One comment was that unfortunately the curriculum studies part of the programme is now more about research methodology and critical reading etc than how a subject is taught in schools, which is a pity. On the other hand the need for tutors to think more carefully about their evidence base, references etc was very positive. There was a general feeling that this was a very positive change to the PGCE programme but it was early days and it needed to be taken seriously and built into the programme, not just seen particularly by students as a 'bolt on'.

Conclusions

This study was examining the perceptions of teacher educators in one university of the changes to the PGCE. When a version of this paper was presented at the ESCalate conference (May 2009) it was clear from the ensuing discussion that the same issues also apply to other institutions. It is interesting that although the change to the PGCE came about through correcting an anomaly following the Bologna Declaration, it fits in with government plans for teaching to become a Masters level profession, and pleases those who want a move away from standards and competencies. It clearly has caused concerns, especially for tutors without a Masters degree

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themselves, but has generally been viewed very positively, as a challenge and an opportunity for trainee teachers to develop reflection and criticality. The comments made about students needing to understand what M level really means mirror the comment made by Jackson and Eady (2008) that there is an irony in trying to create a critical thinking and questioning profession which is founded on a trusting and uncritical acceptance of a new way forward because government and tutors say so – what Atkinson (2000) described as ‘critical schizophrenia’ – delivering government policies on one hand while critiquing them with the other. Jackson and Eady also echo the views expressed in the study that the M level study is not a ‘bolt on’ but must meet its potential to develop critical awareness and reflection within the teaching profession, built on a collective understanding of what it means to study at Masters level.

Throughout the study, assessment was seen as a real issue, particularly the problem of marking around the Masters level/not Masters level borderline. This was not seen as an issue specifically resulting from the change to the PGCE but this has highlighted general issues with assessment – how to ensure consistency of judgements between markers, and how to explain why a piece of work should be marked at 66 or 68. Some students did not understand the requirements, so they produced good data from their investigations but with a poor literature review and methodology section. Edwards and Pope (2006:51) found that assessment was a problem even for the most experienced tutors

One of the indeterminable issues for assessing PGCE trainees at M level was the amount of time necessary to moderate such work and agree the quality which represents Masters level attainment, despite the agreed assessment identifiers within established Masters level courses in each institution.

They also found that a significant problem is the time allocated to tutors – within most institutions the PGCE M level work is undertaken by tutors in addition to their normal role, without recognition of the change of the

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'additional burden' occasioned by the shift from a pedagogical to an academic focus.

It is clear, from this study and others, that the PGCE with M level components has generally been well received by both tutors and trainee teachers. Even over the timescale of this study teacher educators have been adapting to the changes and demands of the new PGCE but some of the difficulties and anxieties could have been avoided if the changes had been phased in over a longer period. This would particularly have allowed tutors who had recently moved from schools to study at Masters level themselves. It would also have given institutions more time to consider some of the issues raised within this study, including the difficulty of incorporating Masters level work and personal responsibility for learning into a taught course, much of which is spent in school and the transition from a programme where assessment relates to the achievement of competences to one which focuses on criticality and reflection.

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