Partnership: developing the model for Initial Teacher Training

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1. Introduction

1.1 Reform of teacher training

In an era of political pressure to ‘reform teacher training so that more training is on the job and focuses on key teaching skills’ ((DfE, 2010, page 20) how might Higher Education providers work with schools to ensure high quality training? If the partnership is to facilitate practitioner research and collaboration can the structures, roles and activities within the training model, not only enhance the quality of training, but contribute to the development of a strong model of teaching staff and school development.

1.2 Aim of the Paper

This paper presents a case study of the changes to the model of partnership between a University providing teacher training and the associated schools that take trainees on placement during their PGCE or BA courses. These courses, together with the school experience, lead to Qualified Teacher Status for successful trainees. The overall aim of this paper is to analyse the effectiveness of the newly implemented partnership model and determine any adjustments needed for 2011/12 academic year. We also discuss the extent to which the model is surfacing other opportunities that will contribute to staff and school development.

2. Context

2.1 Background Literature

The recent White Paper (DfE, 2010) proposed the development of a national network of Teaching Schools that will, among other things, deliver Initial Teacher Training. This intent to move Teacher Training into schools is not a new suggestion, the move has been happening gradually over many years. Central control over teacher training institutions in England started with the introduction of the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education in 1985 (DES, 1985). Wilkin (1996) reports on this publication as follows ‘the criteria are …. noteworthy in two respects: for the redistribution of power both overtly and covertly from the institutions to the schools and for the practical nature of the
proposals’. One of the first practical proposals to address this was the creation in 1993 of School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITTs). This followed proposals in Circular 9/92 (DfE, 1992) to increase the amount of time that trainees should spend in the classroom and working with mentors. Other initiatives such as the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) have followed, and more recently schemes such as Teach First.

Although the various schemes have been school based many of them have included a higher education provider in the partnership, although this has not normally been a requirement. Abrahams (1997) presents a partnership model ‘The Gloucestershire Initial Teacher Education Partnership’. He describes the setting up of this partnership coinciding with the creation of a PGCE course and the termination of an undergraduate course. There were concerns about the future of the department and of redundancy of HE staff, themes which resonate with the current ITT climate. A more recent partnership is described by Whitehead and Fitzgerald (2006) who discuss an environment in which they worked with school based partners on a Training School project. They admitted that their existing partnership model had been University led and top down. The mentors had been trained by the University to support the trainees and assess against QTS standards. The project involved a ‘generative’ approach and entailed mentors and trainees co-planning lessons, video-recording and analysing their lessons and using pupil feedback in the process. This was an example of HE providing a research focus through an action research model.

2.2 Initial situation

In 2009, at the point that the Dean of Education at the university in question retired an Interim Dean was appointed and it was apparent that the partnership schools and some of the trainees had concerns with the operation of the partnership. As a result the Interim Dean commissioned a report by an External Consultant. This report identified a number of concerns including the model of partnership and the communication between the University and the schools in the partnership. It led to the decision to reconfigure the Partnership Board comprising members of the University and the schools, putting in place an external Chair, and use this board to reconfigure the operation of the partnership. Simultaneously, it was timely to redesign the curriculum for the undergraduate and postgraduate courses of both primary and secondary teacher training.

2.3 Key driver

The situation was exacerbated, when in March 2010, Ofsted graded the primary provision as inadequate. The factors leading to this result included concern over the teaching of phonics, trainee dissatisfaction, lack of systematic tracking of trainees, subject knowledge not rigorously audited, lack of support on school placement and lack of clear lines of accountability for monitoring the quality of training.
2.4 Structural changes

There followed a significant set of staffing changes with new staff appointed from outside and within the University and changes of role for those in the Faculty. With the appointment of a new Deputy Dean, Head of Department, Programme Leader, Partnership Director and several subject specialists the Primary Recovery Plan was devised. It covered three key areas. These areas are represented in the diagram below and include Standards, Support and Structures. Standards relates to internal and external moderation, including systems for judging and monitoring the acquisition of Q standards. Support relates to the role of Personal Tutors, School Mentors, University training and support for subject knowledge development. Finally Structure relates to the aspects discussed within this paper. This includes the related staff roles, the grouping of schools into hubs, the new partnership committee structure and the training provided for School Mentors and Visiting Tutors.

Building the Partnership

- Standards
  - Internal moderation and external examining
- Support
  - Centre training, mentor support and observation
- Structures
  - Hubs, roles, monitoring and staff development

National, local and cluster school initiatives

3. Models of partnership

3.1 The 2010/11 Model

Our initial structure included the creation of eleven clusters of schools to cover the region in which we place trainees. Each cluster was centred on a hub and comprised a designated University Link Tutor and two School Lead Mentors (one for primary and one for secondary). Role responsibilities were defined and documented in the School Experience Handbook and staff development was provided. The key appointment of a post of Partnership Director was made and she has led the administrative team and worked alongside the Programme Leaders to develop and implement new systems. Lead Mentor events and hub meetings where
Lead Mentors meet with their associated mentors, have taken place. A number of committees have been set up to monitor targets and progress new initiatives. The diagram indicates the committee structure with the bold titles indicating the committees with membership including school staff.

Developing the role of Lead Mentor was a key feature of the new model. The nature of the Visiting Tutors who visit schools to observe trainees also changed. Previously Associate Tutors on hourly paid contracts were appointed to undertake this role. This continues to a limited extent, often using recently retired primary Head Teachers. But additionally academic staff from within the faculty are now all Visiting Tutors. This was made possible by changing the placement pattern so that trainees from all year groups were in placement at the same time. This reduced conflicts between staff teaching timetables and school visits. The Visiting Tutors were allocated to geographical hubs convenient for travel and they remained linked to specific schools as far as possible.

3.2 Adaptation of the model during the year

An important change introduced during the first term, coincided with trainees starting their first school experience. This was the introduction of a new set of grading criteria. Although this is actually part of the Standards circle in the Venn diagram model presented in section 2 it had a major impact on trainees and mentors and is thus referred to here. The initial role of the Visiting Tutor was to grade the trainee during two visits per placement. However, during the course of the year the role was adapted to move to a clearer quality assurance role. This included an initial visit to the school to meet the trainee, the head teacher and all the supervising mentors. Visiting Tutors also collected data about the school
for the database. Later, they ensured that any mentors who had not been able to attend this year’s training were fully briefed and finally, alongside the mentor, they made a judgement on the trainee.

4. Methodology

4.1 Evaluation

We used a range of different techniques to evaluate the success of our new initiatives. The evaluation served a number of purposes. Firstly it allowed us to review the impact of our actions and make changes quickly, where necessary. While some actions had to wait until the next annual cycle, others could, and were, made quickly. We were to be revisited by Ofsted within the year and had to ensure that the Required Actions identified had been carried out and had achieved the impact on trainees that was intended. It was therefore important that we monitored trainee satisfaction as well as trainee competence and confidence in systematic synthetic phonics and other areas. Being responsive to trainees was crucially important. We introduced a new committee ‘Teacher Education Quality Improvement Group’ to monitor and review progress on a regular basis.

4.2 Methods of data collection

We collected the data for our own long term purposes, for shorter term provision of information for Ofsted and to enable us to make changes where necessary. Some of this data is presented in this paper. We used questionnaires regularly to collect data from each cohort of trainees. In the main we used the questionnaires to gather their views or perceptions. In relation to the development of their teaching of phonics we instead aimed to assess their confidence and we set them directed tasks while on school experience to assess their competence.

We also commissioned three external consultants. Two of them collected information from schools and trainees that relate mainly to the Support section on the Venn diagram in section 2 and the third focused on the partnership model Structure. This consultant collected data by studying the range of documentation and he also held a focus group meeting with Lead Mentors and interviewed a range of participants.

5. Findings

5.1 Communication

The issue of communication was one of the major concerns during the defining of the new Partnership Model. The appointment of the Partnership Director has made massive inroads into improving this area. She has coordinated the Partnership Team, redesigned and enhanced the documentation to go to schools and produced the partnership newsletter. She therefore has the clearest view of the messages being distributed to partner schools. While partner schools will contact the Partnership Team
and the appropriate Visiting Tutor when there are queries, in any problem cases the Partnership Director is likely to be involved. She has provided a much clearer point of contact and thus facilitated communication.

Another major improvement that has resulted, at least partly from this appointment, is the earlier allocation of trainees to schools for their placement. This has been accompanied with earlier distribution of documentation such as the School Experience Handbook to schools and information about the trainee. It has also allowed the trainee, in most cases, to make a preliminary visit to their placement school. This has benefitted the school, the mentor and the trainee and provided reassurance to the trainee, as well as helping them plan their travel arrangements. There were a small number of trainees placed in the final two weeks and they were unhappy at the late notice so this remains a small problem to address in the next year.

In previous years Mentor Training had not been very successful, either in terms of attendance or satisfaction, and the number of sessions offered had been limited. Considerable strides were made in offering more sessions and improving the quality. There was a belief that attendance had been poor because mentors considered the sessions not worth attending. Sessions were run at the start of year and shortly before the trainees started the block placement element of their school experience, the element where they are assessed. Feedback from mentor training sessions was positive, the average score being 8.4/10 for satisfaction. Attendance was much improved though still had some way to go. Roughly 40% of mentors attended across 7 events.

During the course of the first semester the decision was taken to change the marking scheme by which trainees were graded when in the classroom. The reason for this was primarily the feedback from the Ofsted 2010 report that indicated that the accuracy of our grading could not be confirmed. We inferred that this was due to the grading system we used. The previous system comprised a different set of standards for each cohort such that an undergraduate year 1 trainee could gain a satisfactory grade with a poorer performance than an undergraduate year 2 trainee. Thus it was agreed to redesign the grading system based on the Ofsted Criteria (Ofsted, 2007, pp 58-60). This decision was made after some of the mentor training had taken place and the original grading booklets had been distributed. We made the tough decision to make the late change and sent out the revised paperwork shortly before the trainees were to be graded. This caused some worries for mentors who had used the previous system. Nevertheless it proved to be the right decision as the feedback for all concerned has been very positive. By the end of the year 96% of the Visiting Tutors and 96% of the mentors agreed the criteria were effective.

5.2 Consistency

There were a number of areas where changes were made to ensure a greater level of consistency. This was to simplify and to clarify
expectations to trainees. The first aspect was the use of Visiting Tutors. All the academic staff who teach primary rainees were Visiting Tutors and as this did not provide sufficient coverage additional Associate Tutors were appointed on an hourly paid basis, they were carefully selected. The vast majority of Visiting Tutors proved highly suitable. They were normally selected from recently retired teachers including a number of head teachers. Another significant change was the allocation of a Visiting Tutor to all the trainees in a specific school. This was a more resource effective and practical arrangement but it also helped to build the relationship with the school. They will continue to link with the same schools next year thus building their knowledge of the schools and of the strengths of the mentors.

The changes to the Visiting Tutor role during the course of the year have been described above, in section 3.2. All the faculty staff undertook this role and their experience in schools was invaluable in linking the University training to the school experience. The role of the Visiting Tutor became a more significant quality assurance role with an early visit to meet the Head Teacher, mentors and trainees and the completion of a check sheet about the school. A support tutor was used for any trainees where a ‘cause for concern’ was raised so that they could be provided with additional support.

The placement pattern in schools was changed so that all three undergraduate cohorts and the PGCE trainees started their placements at the same time. Schools had indicated a preference for this model. For the university staff it avoided the problem of making school visits while teaching other trainees. There were, however, some issues with the new pattern. It was a late start for PGCE trainees and made it difficult to assess their teaching early to gain a starting benchmark. Trainees were in school shortly before Christmas and this caused a problem with their workload as they had assessed work to hand in while in school. Also some trainees felt that the pre-Christmas period in school did not provide the best learning experience. An unintended change that introduced a higher level of consistency was the change to the grading of trainees’ teaching described in section 5.1.

Questionnaires to all trainees at the end of each school experience included questions on the support offered to them by various categories of staff. All cohorts found the Visiting Tutor and Mentors’ roles clear and found them supportive\(^1\). The Personal Tutor role was less clear and the undergraduate cohorts were less positive about the support received than the postgraduate. In summary, both the practical management of the trainee’s meetings with their Personal Tutor and the clarity of purpose for the role needed to be addressed.

\(^1\) 94% of PGCE and 93% BA felt that Visiting Tutor helped set targets
\(^2\) 92% of PGCE and 89% BA felt that Mentor helped planning lessons
\(^3\) 83 of PGCE and 65% BA felt that role of Personal Tutor clear
\(^4\) 99% of PGCE and 77% BA felt that Personal Tutor was supportive
5.3 Relationships

In addition to the developing role of the Visiting Tutors, which has improved the relationship with schools, other changes to roles have helped to cement relationships. A key aspect is the creation of hubs, regional groups of schools each allocated a University Link Tutor and a Lead Mentor, the latter appointed from among the mentors in the hub and paid a small stipend. The Link Tutor was a key role to act as the conduit of information between the University and a Lead Mentor in a hub. However, it proved difficult to identify enough staff to take on this role, given the size of the department. Also most University communication came from the Partnership Director to ensure a level of consistency and when Lead Mentors had queries they normally approached her making the Link Tutor superfluous. Additionally, as the Link Tutor was one of the Visiting Tutors liaising with mentors and this dual role caused some confusion. Finally, and most importantly, the Link Tutors did not have enough time to contribute meaningfully to the role alongside their other tasks.

The Lead Mentor role was also not entirely successful. Although there was activity in some hubs in others Lead Mentors found it difficult to gain responses from mentors. Attendance at twilight sessions was often poor. In two hubs there were no applicants for Lead Mentor and therefore there was some doubling up. However, this was resolved towards the end of the year. Lead Mentors and Visiting Tutors meeting at the School Experience Panel at the end of year have informed the further development of the Lead Mentor role so that it will be clearer and more useful in future.

The set of committees to provide direction to the developing partnership have become more effective during the course of the year. As the relationship between the various parties has developed the Strategic Partnership Group has become more open and constructive and started to develop a much more strategic approach to the partnership. An interesting comment was made by one of the Head Teachers on the group during a meetings with the Ofsted inspector in March 2011: ‘National initiatives are now seen as opportunities for all partners to discuss. In the past time would have ben spent whinging about the impossibility of addressing new requirements.’ The remit for each committee was re-written and discussed and amended at the first meeting of the year and this will continue. The Primary Practitioner Forum has provided a suitable environment for more detailed discussions about aspects of the curriculum or the trainee activity in school. Finally the School Experience Panel has looked at data from schools. With the support of the Partnership Group, the Partnership Agreement has been tightened and includes a reference to deselecting schools when necessary. The main issue that would cause this to occur was if the school was judged inadequate by Ofsted. This happened in one case and six trainees were moved to other schools in the first two weeks of placement.
5.4 Placing trainees in schools

Most\(^2\) trainees were placed in suitable schools two weeks prior to the commencement of the placement. At this stage the relationship with the schools had not changed in any significant way. The actions that had an impact were firstly, the Partnership Director meeting regularly with the placement team and providing them with the support and direction they needed. Secondly, weekly reports on the number placed were reported to the senior management in the Faculty and they generated ideas and pressed the team to try different approaches.

6. The future for the Partnership

6.1 Mentoring

In terms of the Initial Teacher Training aspects of the partnership the following aspects will be changed for 2011/12. The Partnership Agreement will be tightened to hold schools to account for the quality of mentoring. We have included a statement of what good quality mentoring is. Training for new mentors will be held centrally and it will be a requirement that schools ensure that new mentors attend. Returning mentors and those who have mentored for other HEIs will be required to attend training sessions led by the Lead Mentor in a hub. The contract for the Lead Mentor includes the delivery of a minimum number of training sessions.

6.2 Grading criteria and tutoring

The new marking criteria have been tweaked slightly to use a 7 point scale rather than a 4 point one to allow progress of trainees to be mapped more precisely. All training will focus on using the grade points and there will be video examples of teaching that all attendees at training events will grade to standardise marking. Additional internal and external moderation of trainees’ teaching will take place. There will be a risk based focus identifying those schools where moderation, and perhaps additional support, is needed. The Personal Tutoring roles will be limited mainly to full time academic staff to ease meeting arrangements, and there will be fewer meetings. A handbook for Personal Tutors will ensure a greater level of consistency. Some of the paperwork that trainees use and produce, such as the Personal Development Portfolio, will be simplified to make the process easier and less resource intensive for trainees and mentors, and to ease final marking.

6.3 Placement pattern and partnership events

The placement pattern has been tweaked so that it does not clash with assessment hand-in and to enable PGCE trainees to be in school earlier and

\(^2\) 93% trainees placed two weeks before for placement A
90% trainees placed two weeks before for placement B
to benchmark their standards. Trainees will be formatively assessed teaching small groups early in the placement. We will also be using a number of schools to share their expertise and to provide a wider experience for trainees early in the programme. We have held a number of partnership events this year and changed to a more group based and interactive mode rather than the lecture based system that we had previously adopted for the annual Partnership Conference. We expect this type of event to continue with an increasing frequency.

7. Conclusion

We are discussing new initiatives outside the remit of initial teacher training. These include new curriculum development for the Continuous Professional Development of teaching staff in the region. A number of partner staff have registered for our newly re-launched EdD in Education. We are also exploring Accreditation of Prior Learning and this may be linked to a shell award that is currently going through approval in the University. We have linked with schools in their bids to be teaching schools. In addition to the Leading Partners in Literacy project that is already underway we are bidding for Leading Partners in Literacy and Mathematics. Research activity is beginning in schools using our post-doctoral researchers. Schools are now keen to work with us.

Our Ofsted visit in 2011 resulted in satisfactory grades. While there is still work to do five strengths were identified and the new partnership model was recognised. A key strength noted was the improved levels of communication across the partnership and the report noted that ‘A shared vision and commitment to training teachers of the future is clearly apparent across the partnership’.

References


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