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Initial Teacher Education in Ireland: Structure, policy developments and implications for practice

Manuela Heinz

National University of Ireland Galway

Introduction

This paper aims to provide an overview of recent policy developments in Initial Teacher Education in Ireland, their impact on practices and challenges for ITE providers and schools. It will outline and discuss recruitment and selection processes, recent structural and programme design changes as well as the cultural and political platforms on which teacher education is enacted.

Teaching is a regulated profession in Ireland and teachers employed in state-funded teaching positions must be registered with the Irish Teaching Council in order to be paid from public funds (Section 30 of the Teaching Council Act, 2001). Initial teacher education programmes for primary, second-level and further education teachers are accredited by the Teaching Council, which was established on a statutory basis in 2006. The number of places on initial teacher education courses has traditionally been limited to 1,000 places per year for both, primary and post-primary programmes by the Higher Education Authority. However, these quotas have not been rigidly enforced in recent years with numbers of ITE graduates from state-funded higher education institutions reaching in excess of 1,800 for primary and 1,400 for post-primary teacher education programmes since 2008 (Hyland, 2012, p. 17). In addition, numbers of ITE graduates from Hibernia College, a private provider of teacher education in the UK and Ireland blending online and face-to-face tuition, have been growing since 2007 (375 primary teaching graduates in 2011, first post-primary cohort graduated in 2013).

Demand for places on state-funded ITE programmes has been high with only between 30 and 40 per cent of applications resulting in offers (Heinz, 2008, 2011). Candidates are in most cases selected through competitive points systems whereby prior academic performance (post-primary performance for undergraduate programmes and undergraduate degree performance for postgraduate programmes) is rated and complemented, in the case of postgraduate programmes, by a much smaller number of available points allocated for relevant professional experience and further qualifications (Master, PhD, other third-level courses). Proficiency in Irish and, more recently, performance in English and mathematics, are also assessed as part of the selection system for primary ITE candidates. Only a small number of institutions and programmes are currently including interviews in the selection process (Dublin City University, Trinity College Dublin and the University of Limerick) (Heinz, 2011). In terms of their profile, ITE students in Ireland have been found to be homogeneously Irish (98%), predominately female (over 70%), high academic achievers. Studies exploring student teachers' career motivations found that intrinsic and altruistic career values are rated significantly higher than extrinsic motivating factors and that ITE entrants are confident in their ability to become effective teachers who enjoy their work (Drudy et al., 2005; Heinz, 2011). Despite the general perception that the teaching profession continues to enjoy high social regard amongst the Irish public (Hyland, 2012), second-level student teachers have reported that they encountered discouraging advice from others in relation to their career choice before embarking on their ITE programmes (Heinz, 2011). The two reasons most frequently mentioned in relation to this discouragement are 'increasing problems with discipline in schools' and the 'lack of full-time teaching positions in schools' (Ibid.).

As regards the latter, an oversupply of teachers and ITE graduates has been noted for a number of years by ITE providers, schools and teachers' unions who have been expressing concern about the "casualization of teaching [and lecturing]" in Ireland which is leading to 'severe income poverty for many teachers struggling on fixed-term (temporary) contracts in part-time positions (MacGabhann, 2012). Anecdotal evidence suggests that many graduates from Irish ITE programmes are leaving Ireland to start their teaching careers in the UK and further afield, often after unsuccessfully pursuing teaching positions in Ireland.

Recent developments at teacher education policy level

In 2011, the Irish Teaching Council published two significant teacher education policy documents: the *Continuum of Teacher Education* and the *Criteria and Guidelines for Providers of Initial Teacher Education Programmes*. The former emphasizes the centrality of cohesion and connection in teacher education policy and practice across all phases of the teaching career. It provides the framework for significant changes, including the extension and reconceptualization of both concurrent and sequential Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes and the introduction of a mandatory induction phase for ITE graduates.

The *Criteria and Guidelines for Providers of Initial Teacher Education* (Teaching Council, 2011b) lay out the specific accreditation requirements for reconceptualised ITE programmes detailing mandatory programme components, weighting between academic and practical (school placement) modules as well as a detailed list of learning outcomes for ITE graduates. The guidelines furthermore specify requirements in terms of staff qualifications, engagement and research activity as well as student-staff ratios. As regards the latter it is envisaged that the 'ratio of students to academic staff should be a maximum of 15:1' which 'allows for small group work, for the modeling of effective teaching methodologies and for teaching the skills necessary for meaningful reflective practice' (20). In the current higher education context where, due to significant cuts to HEI's budgets, staff reduction rather than increase is the norm, this ratio can be interpreted as highly ambitious. The blueprint for programme development emphasizes the expectation that graduate teachers have the competence to engage professionally as lifelong learners throughout their career. Linking theory and practice of learning and teaching through reflective and systematic inquiry will therefore be central to future ITE programmes aiming to develop students' core skills in reflective practice and research/enquiry-based learning. An increased emphasis on literacy, numeracy and inclusion is also evident. Integral to all ITE programmes and central to student teacher development is the School Placement element of the programmes. What is envisaged is the development of new and innovative school placement models based on a partnership approach between HEIs and schools.

The duration of most current ITE programmes will be extended with the new minimum duration of 4 years for undergraduate concurrent programmes (from September 2013) and 2 years for postgraduate consecutive programmes (from September 2014). Following the Teaching Council's requirement for extended programmes, most state-funded postgraduate post-primary ITE programmes have been reconceptualised as two-year full-time "Professional Master of Education" programmes.

New Structure for Initial Teacher Education Provision in Ireland

In April 2012, the Minister for Education and Skills announced a major review of publicly provided teacher education in Ireland aimed at identifying a new structure for ITE so as to strengthen and deepen the quality of provision. The international panel of reviewers recommended that teacher education provision in Ireland should be consolidated according to the following configuration:

- 6.1 Dublin City University - St. Patrick's College Drumcondra - Mater Dei Institute of Education
- 6.2 Trinity College Dublin - Marino Institute of Education - University College Dublin – National College of Art and Design
- 6.3 National University of Ireland Maynooth - Froebel College
- 6.4 University of Limerick - Mary Immaculate College - Limerick Institute of Technology 6.5 University College Cork - Cork Institute of Technology
- 6.6 National University of Ireland Galway - St. Angela's College Sligo

Considering that provision of ITE in Ireland encompassed 19 state-funded providers (plus three non-funded providers – Hibernia college and two Montessori colleges) offering 40 ITE programmes for primary and post-primary level, the restructuring of publicly funded ITE provision into 6 larger, university-based centers marks a significant change in the Irish ITE landscape.

In its report, the review panel emphasizes that teacher education institutions need to be sufficiently large and university-based in order to provide high-quality and research driven ITE programmes.

Policy into practice – new understandings and actions on the ground

Teachers as lifelong learners and the centrality of school-university partnership

The new policy on the Continuum of Teacher Education sends a strong message to beginning and experienced teachers as well as teacher educators and school leaders. It recognizes that ITE cannot provide teachers with all the knowledge and skills needed for a demanding career spanning up to a number of decades and situated in increasingly complex and ever-changing social and educational settings. Over the past two decades, the demands on Irish schools have, not unlike in many other international contexts, become increasingly complex: pupil populations have become more diverse and the teachers' tasks and necessary skills have broadened immensely as a result of profound economic, demographic, social, cultural, technological, and occupational changes.

While an overview of the specific components of the various newly conceptualized ITE programmes is not available to date, it appears that a number of ITE programmes will engage their student teachers in action research projects. The central aims of newly designed ITE action research modules will include the development of (i) student teachers' critical awareness and understanding of the unique dynamics of learning and teaching in school environments as well as (ii) their proficiency with research-based teaching and enquiry-based practice.

Systematic and collaborative enquiry into teaching practice and learning in schools is, of course, of great interest to and also dependent on the support of school leaders and practicing teachers. A research-based approach to teacher education throughout the continuum will require close collaboration of all involved and careful attention to the ethical dimensions of school-based research. It is clear that the successful implementation of such an ambitious initiative will, among many other factors, depend on the relationships and collaboration between university-based teacher educators and principals and teachers of schools.

The importance of collaboration between teacher educators, school leaders and teaching practitioners is highlighted in the "school placement section" of the Teaching Council's Criteria and Guidelines (2011b, pp. 16-18) which specifies that "new and innovative school placement models should be developed using a partnership approach, whereby HEIs and schools actively collaborate in the organisation of the school placement." In terms of the process for school-university partnership development, the document further clarifies that "such models would be actively fostered by providers based on a written policy on partnership" (Ibid., p. 16).

It is interesting to note that this section describing requirements for ITE school placements which goes on to explain that such 'partnership models' will involve "greater levels of responsibility being devolved to the profession for the provision of structured support for student teachers" has triggered most questions and discussions in schools and teacher education circles. It is also the only section resulting in requests (by ITE providers) for structured support by the Teaching Council to support the implementation of the "mandated" (partnership) approach. This request and the resulting negotiation process carried out by a national working group of stakeholders is testament to the enduring challenges which Irish ITE providers have been facing in this area and which have over the past 5 years been further compounded by budget constraints and new pressures facing schools as a result of Ireland's economic crisis and a demanding education reform agenda.

The negotiation process consisted of 6 working group meetings and 2 open stakeholder meetings bringing together, for the first time in Irish teacher education history, representatives from the Teaching Council and the Department of Education and Skills, ITE providers, principal associations, teachers unions and the National Parents Council. Guidelines on School Placement (1st edition) were presented at the most recent stakeholder meeting in June 2013 as an addendum to the Council's accreditation criteria for programmes of initial teacher education.

The described process of stakeholder exchange and discussion and the publication of a written document describing a partnership approach to the school placement is a clear step forward from the previous situation where any type of exchange was restricted to the efforts of individual ITE providers working with schools in a tradition of goodwill. It is difficult to predict the impact of this process on practices on the ground in the near future. While many benefits of the partnership approach are described and specific suggestions in relation to school placement activities are forwarded, the traditional imbalance in terms of the understanding of who is (ultimately) responsible for developing partnerships and ensuring the quality of ITE programme delivery (including the school placement component) has not been explicitly challenged by this document: while it suggests that ITE providers apply a more structured approach to the identification, involvement and support of host schools following *more* (added by author) consultation with all stakeholders, participation of teachers and schools is described as *voluntary* and based on *goodwill* (rather than a professional responsibility, emphasis added by author) (pp. 8, 10).

Initial analyses of an Irish school-university partnership research (SUPR) study exploring the design and implementation of an innovative partner school placement model highlight many of the benefits of partnership approaches while also describing the cultural and ethical dimensions and tensions experienced by the key actors in the newly conceptualized hybrid space (Heinz, 2014; Higgins et al., 2012). Reflections of HEI tutors involved in the partnership project emphasise the importance of openness throughout the process, the development of a shared mission and a culture based on authentic dialogue, learning, enjoyment and consensus (Ibid). While feedback on the partnership initiative from participating schools and teachers has been very positive and promising, the study also brings to light a number of challenges including the lack of resources to support closer collaboration, the persisting difficulties experienced by HEI providers in terms of 'recruiting' schools and committed teachers as partners, and the cultural and ethical complexities of cross-institutional and interpersonal relationship building.

A heightened role for a whole-university approach to teacher education

The ITE review panel report highlights the importance of providing ITE in universities where a critical mass of subject discipline experts and a general research culture exist. There are ample opportunities for subject experts

to contribute to teacher education across the continuum. They might, for example, provide updates on developments in their fields specifically tailored to teachers, or insight into the knowledge and abilities possessed and/or the culture shared by those who create, communicate and use knowledge within their disciplines. Teacher educators and student teachers can also benefit from more active engagement with university-based research centres, for example, in the areas of Child and Family, Innovation and Societal Change and Human Rights research, as well as other related disciplines like Cognitive and Social Psychology, Sociology and Political Science, Occupational Therapy, Speech & Language Therapy, Health Promotion and Clinical Psychology (examples from NUI Galway). Bringing subject specialists and researchers who have traditionally been more removed from school education and teacher development into a new hybrid space where academic and practitioner knowledge come together in new, less hierarchical ways in the service of teacher learning (Zeichner, 2010) will be a new challenge and distinct learning venture for teacher educators.

Internationalising Irish teacher education

The ITE Review Panel's report emphasizes the benefits of greater collaboration between ITE providers in Ireland and partner institutions internationally. In particular, it notes that the proportion of outgoing students in teacher education institutions is very low by European standards. International mobility of students and staff of Higher Education Institutions is one of the key aspects of Irish and European higher education policy today. Many of the Irish ITE providers have experience as hosts for international student teachers and appreciate the positive benefits of international exchange programmes. However, programmes, particularly the one-year postgraduate programmes, have traditionally not included the opportunity for student exchange activities as they were perceived to be too short and "packed". The new extended Master of Education programmes will provide more space for ITE providers to support student exchanges and integrate comparative education themes in their programmes.

Conclusion

Recent ITE policy changes led by the Teaching Council and recommendations forwarded by the ITE review panel mark the beginning of a major cultural shift in teacher education in Ireland whereby the preparation of teachers for the future is now seen to require much more interaction and close collaboration between a wide range of stakeholders and experts. Teacher educators will play a vital role in bringing this vision to fruition. They are challenged with the task of developing collaborative partnership networks both nationally, in the school settings as well as within and across universities, and internationally.

The issue of a current teacher oversupply and consequent reduction in opportunities for employment requires attention and policy action. As argued by the ITE review panel, where there is an oversupply of teachers it may not be possible to continue to attract high calibre entrants into teaching (ITE Review Group, 2012, p. (20). The desirability of diversifying the teaching force is, furthermore, evident from both contemporary Irish research studies and policy documents (Heinz, 2011; Irish Teaching Council, 2008) and a dedicated study exploring Diversity in Initial Teacher Education (DITE) in Ireland (led by Heinz and Keane from NUI Galway) has recently been funded by the Irish Research Council.

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