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Leading the renewal of a profession: Approaches to developing teacher educators' research capacity in higher education

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journals.sagepub.com/home/mieFeng Su¹ , Margaret Wood² and Matthew Clarke³

Abstract

Teacher educators in higher education are often encouraged to engage with research to enhance their own subject knowledge and professional practice, improve teacher education programmes, and contribute to educating better trainee teachers. However, research shows that there are a number of barriers for teacher educators to engage with research. Drawing on our experiences of working with teacher educators in higher education contexts in England, this article outlines six institutional approaches in supporting research capacity development. These approaches include research training, mentorship, internal funding, writing support, workload recognition, and the cultivation of a research culture to value practitioner research. We argue that sustained institutional commitment to these areas is essential to empower teacher educators to contribute to knowledge production, improve teaching practice, and engage with wider conversations about teacher education reforms. Also, developing research capacity among teacher educators is central to educating a new generation of teaching professionals who improve educational practice through meaningful engagement with research-informed teacher enquiry. In the renewal of a profession, we argue for an inclusive view of research and teaching as conjoined academic practice which acts as a bulwark against unequal, elitist and career-limiting hierarchical perceptions when these activities are disaggregated.

Keywords

teacher educators, research capacity, higher education, teaching profession

Within the current system, initial teacher educators are invariably playing the research ‘game’ according to rules that seriously disadvantage them. What is required of universities is a more sophisticated view of what constitutes research, and research relevance, and a more robust response to the inadequacies of existing research selection mechanisms. (Nixon et al., 2000: 257)

The development of teacher educators as active researchers in higher education settings can be a way to draw teaching and research into closer dialogue in their professional practice. There are many examples of how teachers can become researchers evident from the early days, in Lewin’s work (1948) and Stenhouse’s (1975) vision of teacher researchers in professional communities, but there is still a debate about teacher research and ‘real’ research in the academic arena. Similar challenges and dilemmas are faced by those working in other practice-oriented areas of higher education such as health professionals (e.g. Segrott et al., 2006). This trend is partly driven by the belief that a research-based or research-informed practice ultimately improves the quality of teacher education in general. Tatto and Furlong (2015: 146) argued that ‘as part of the political drive to improve the quality of teaching and learning, education policy-makers across the UK have sought to stimulate more evidence-informed approaches to educational policy and professional

practice’. At the same time, teacher educators are often positioned between competing sets of accountability demands and institutional expectations. The cumulative effect of this positioning has been to ‘proletarianise’ teacher educators within the wider university economy (Ellis et al., 2014). This positioning is reflected in, and exacerbated by, structural inequalities, such as staff-student ratios, under-recognised or even invisibilised work, as well as by cultural factors impeding teacher educators from fully engaging and developing as researchers.

This article draws on our experiences, as research mentors, of working with teacher educators in higher education to develop their research capacity. Through reflection on our experiences and relevant literature, it is apparent that teacher educators frequently face a number of challenges

¹School of Education and Social Sciences, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

²School of Education, Language and Psychology, York St John University, York, UK

³School of Education, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

Corresponding author:

Feng Su, School of Education and Social Sciences, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK.

Email: suf@hope.ac.uk

when they embark on a research journey. In this article, we argue that certain institutional conditions need to be in place to enable teacher educators to develop their research capacity. This includes a reaffirmation of the unity of research and teaching within academic practice.

Different understandings of what ‘research capacity-building’ is appear to exist, as well as different ideas as to how to achieve it. Oancea et al. (2021) have argued that ‘future efforts to support research capacity-building in education must move beyond the pervasive but simplistic idea of trying to “bridge” a gap, or rupture, between research and practice’ (p. 116). These authors also use the term ‘research-rich’ teacher education and see research capacity including individual, organisation and system levels:

... we argue that a rounded understanding of research-rich teacher education practice and policy also includes teacher educators based in schools, colleges or other settings, students, school management, governors, local authorities, policy makers, research funders, publishers. In this sense, ‘capacity’ encompasses individual, organisational and systemic levels. (Oancea et al., 2021: 99)

This vision of ‘research-rich’ teacher education is very different from the ‘evidence based’ practice mantra emanating from policy makers (e.g. Department for Education, 2016), which positions practitioners as instruments and implementers of research knowledge generated elsewhere. However, realising Oancea et al.’s vision entails a number of challenges, which we explore below.

The ‘culture shock’, barriers and the dichotomy between research and teaching

There may be something of a ‘culture shock’ for some teacher educators when moving from a school working environment to a higher education setting. In a school working environment, teaching is a main task. However, universities may have different expectations for teacher educators. Nixon et al. (2000) suggest that teacher educators could feel vulnerable when they transition to a higher education working environment.

The majority of this occupational group will already have pursued a career as teachers in schools, so come to their second career with a very different set of expectations and achievements than many of their academic colleagues. This is particularly crucial given the current premium placed on academic publications, since most initial teacher educators are unlikely to have begun to publish seriously prior to gaining a university post (p. 244).

This ‘culture shock’ is also related to the longstanding dichotomy between research and teaching in higher education. Elton (2009: 248) suggests that ‘arguably the most regrettable feature of the dichotomy between research and teaching is that it has led to a skewed value system of by now long standing, with research being considered significantly more prestigious than teaching’. On the perceived lower status of teaching in higher education, participants in Rowland’s research (2000) expressed that ‘one reason why

teaching was valued less than research was because of the difficulties of assessing teaching. Research, it was argued, could be assessed by the traditional methods of peer review leading to publication (although several had criticisms of how this worked in practice). Teaching, on the other hand, is a largely private affair’ (p. 18). The challenge for management may be ‘how the evaluation of teaching is to be institutionalized’ and ‘Any attempt to institutionalize the evaluation of teaching must be based upon an adequate understanding of the relationships between teaching and research’ (p. 19). The public nature of research activities also means that it is research and not teaching which creates the reputations of individuals and institutions. Against this backdrop, teacher educators are often seen as neither ‘academics’ nor ‘practitioners’ (Day, 1995).

They are caught between the rock of government policy which has raised the value of ‘practical experience’ above all else, thus importing into teacher education the ‘busyness’ culture of school teaching, and the ‘hard place’ of scholarship in which they are judged by their colleagues elsewhere in the world of academe. Their lived experience seems to limit opportunities for scholarship yet those outside their context often regard them as impractical, or worse, ideological (p. 359).

When teacher educators try to engage with scholarship and research activities, they may also face a number of specific barriers. Nicholson and Lander (2020) have identified these barriers as including a lack of time, insufficient mentoring, limited opportunities for research collaboration, the nature of initial teacher education (ITE) and negative feelings towards research. Czerniawski et al. (2018) argued that institutional conditions need to be put in place to support teacher educators in developing their research capacity.

If teacher educators’ lack of confidence in their research and writing skills, and the lack of time, are barriers for teacher educators being teacher educator-researchers, then opportunities need to be created to embed research within the day-to-day practice of a teacher educator (p. 144).

The lack of confidence and lack of time are two different, but related, challenges. The time issue echoes the point about proletarianisation of teacher educators in higher education. ITE is often valued for the teaching income it brings to the university, which involves large class sizes and heavier teaching and assessment loads. Despite these challenges, strategies have been identified to build and enhance research culture and capacity in teacher education, some of which we explore below.

Approaches to developing teacher educators’ research capacity

In our experience of working with teacher educators, we have found the following approaches helpful in research capacity building.

Research skills development

Research capacity begins with access to structured training in research methodologies, design, ethics, and academic writing. Boud et al. (2021: 432) note that ‘a common rationale of professional doctorates is that they build capacity to undertake research in candidates’ own professional contexts’. Our experience shows that both short-term professional development courses and formal postgraduate study (e.g. Master’s and Doctoral programmes) can significantly enhance the research skills and confidence of teacher educators, helping at the same time to forge a stronger research identity. Postgraduate research study can also foster deeper critical engagement with educational theory and practice, positioning teacher educators to contribute meaningfully to the research literature. Institutions that invest in research development create pathways for career enhancement while building a stronger, more capable academic workforce.

Research mentoring and collaborative research projects

Mentorship can have many benefits (Harvey et al., 2017) and is often seen as a cornerstone of effective research capacity building. Research mentoring in higher education can have reciprocal benefits for both mentor and mentee, as ‘mentees gain inclusion in workplace culture, reduced isolation, increased productivity and confidence, and enhanced teaching and research skills. Additionally, mentors derive a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, renewed interest in their work, exposure to new (research) perspectives, and increased networking opportunities’ (Káplár-Kodácsy et al., 2024: 2). Pairing novice researchers with experienced mentors can provide sustained guidance through the research process, including project design, methodology selection, data analysis, and publication. In parallel, collaborative research projects offer opportunities for shared learning and interdisciplinary inquiry. These collaborative efforts can foster collegiality, diversify perspectives, and can support high-quality research outputs. Our experiences suggest that institutional structures supporting mentorship and collaboration can be significant for the development of confident and capable researchers within teacher education.

Internal funding for research activities and dissemination

Access to internal funding can be critical for enabling teacher educators to engage in empirical research. A study by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2012) to examine university teacher educators’ research engagement and assessments of their institutional research culture in a Saudi Arabian university context suggested ‘a perceived gap between the research productivity expected of them and the support they received from their university’ (p. 347). Amongst their conclusions, they pointed to the value of university teacher education departments identifying ‘any additional support teacher educators feel they require in order to be research active and seek feasible ways of providing it’. They offered examples of the different forms such support might take, for example ‘physical and financial resources, training courses, and encouragement

and recognition from managers’ (p. 355). From our experience in UK university settings, we are aware that modest grants can support data collection, materials, research assistance, and travel for conference presentations. Presenting at national and international conferences allows researchers to disseminate findings, receive critical feedback, and build professional networks, as well as affording opportunities for staff to inhabit and adopt a researcher identity. Internal funding also signals institutional support for research engagement, which can motivate greater participation and innovation among staff. Institutions that provide these resources can empower educators to pursue inquiry relevant to their specific teaching and professional contexts.

Support for academic writing and publication

Academic writing and publication often pose significant challenges for teacher educators, particularly those with heavy teaching loads or limited prior experience in scholarly writing. Hardy et al. (2022: 163) suggest that ‘becoming an academic, after a career as a teacher, can be a challenge. A key aspect of this transition is writing and publishing and maintaining the writing habit’. Our experience highlights the value of institutional support through writing groups, peer feedback forums, writing retreats, and editorial mentoring. Such initiatives can demystify the publication process, support the quality of manuscripts, and promote a supportive culture for academic writing.

Recognition of research as part of workload

One of the most consistent barriers to research engagement among teacher educators appears to be a lack of dedicated time for research activities. This no doubt varies between institutions, with post-92 universities having less resources than some of the Russell Group universities, for instance. Quickfall and Wood’s research (2025: 1) shows that ‘teacher educators face high workloads, and importantly, very little time for research. In some cases, there are low expectations from their institutions in terms of their research outputs’. It is important that institutions formally recognise research as a legitimate component of academic work, integrated into workload models and performance review systems. Allocating protected time for research signals a commitment to scholarly development and allows educators to balance teaching, administration, and research responsibilities. Without such recognition, research is often sidelined under pressure of more immediate institutional demands.

Cultivating a research culture to value practitioner research in teacher education

An institutional culture that values inquiry, critical reflection, and scholarly engagement is foundational to sustainable research capacity. This includes promoting practitioner research, which enables educators to investigate and improve their own teaching practices. Hill and Haigh (2012) argue for the role of communities of research practice in building a research culture. In their view, ‘cultivating communities of research practice can assist teacher educators to learn

alongside more experienced colleagues, and become fully fledged researching academics' (p. 971). They also note that 'cultivating communities of research practice, however, has often not been the norm within teacher education institutions such as teachers' colleges. Those teacher educators who have pursued a research career also often have programme responsibilities, or hold other leadership positions, which mitigate against actively building research teams and gaining large funded projects around which communities of research practice can form' (p. 975). Regular seminars, colloquia, research showcases, and recognition of research achievements help to normalise and celebrate research activity. Institutional leaders play a critical role in fostering this environment by setting expectations, allocating resources, and promoting a shared vision of research as integral to teacher education. Supporting practitioner research in particular affirms the value of contextually grounded, practice-based knowledge in informing current debates in teacher education.

Final thoughts

Developing teacher educators' research capacity demands a new institutional epistemology and a new way of knowing, inclusive of teacher educators as knowledge generators. The idea of teachers as members of a research community has been shaped in the UK by figures such as Stenhouse, who saw working in research communities as being important professional development for teachers through reflecting on and improving practice (Burton and Bartlett, 2005). Stenhouse favoured a 'process' curriculum model and his thinking about curriculum reform was informed by 'a view of knowledge as provisional and open to questioning and discussion' (Elliott, 2009: 177).

For teacher educators to become researchers, institutional conditions to enable this are important. This could involve establishing processes for recognising and rewarding teacher education research and providing relevant career progression pathways. In order for this to thrive, opportunities to collaborate as members of a professional research community are needed, underpinned by a democratic view of knowledge creation. At the same time, it is important to be mindful of some potential workload-related issues arising from the intensification of research in teacher education. For instance, without the necessary institutional support and resources, spending more time developing research (and publications) could potentially undermine the quality of teaching and purposes of teacher education. On the other hand, is the teaching and research binary ultimately unhelpful and unfair? The following from Nixon (2009) suggests so.

Research, scholarship and teaching share a necessary relationship based upon the virtuous dispositions implicit in academic practice. The increasing tendency to distinguish institutions of higher education in terms of either their research capacity or their teaching capacity certainly produces deep inequalities within the system. It also, however, fractures the moral coherence of the academic practice comprising those activities (p. 202).

The intensification of educational research in the context of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK also has a number of consequences for academics including

teacher educators. Pring et al. (2017: 618) have outlined four such consequences, namely,

- a focus on internationally significant research (the 'big ideas' of universal application);
- the publication of such research in journals high on the Social Science Citation Index;
- a new and inflated market in the appointment of academics who have so published;
- less significance given to more practically focused research which cemented the relationship between education and schools.

As a result of the above consequences, research seeking REF assessment as internationally excellent is 'unlikely to be pursued in partnership with local schools, and thus to focus on the kind of school improvement arising from teacher based research' (p. 619). In addition, practitioner research in teacher education tends to be poorly viewed in REF terms, which is another way in which teacher educators could be said to be proletarianised in higher education.

Over the past 50 years in England, there has been a consistent and significant policy shift towards giving schools a greater role in initial teacher education, driven by an ideological commitment to reduce university influence (Mutton et al., 2024). While the institutional scaffolding for research capacity development is most commonly directed at university-based teacher educators, the challenges facing school-based colleagues are arguably more acute and require a distinct, context-sensitive translation of these approaches. For school-based teacher educators, the primary barriers are also structural: heavy teaching loads, the immediate pressures of Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) accountability, and a prevailing institutional culture that often privileges pupil outcomes over practitioner enquiry. Consequently, the 'research culture' we advocate in higher education must be reimagined in school settings as a locally situated, practice-embedded endeavour. This necessitates moving beyond generic training to offer mentorship that is responsive to the specific constraints of the school calendar, funding that supports supply cover for enquiry work, and writing support that helps practitioners translate their rich tacit knowledge into accessible, actionable outputs. Crucially, workload recognition must be formalised within school improvement plans, framing research engagement not as an optional extra but as a core component of professional development. By adapting these approaches to the realities of school contexts, we can ensure that research-informed teacher enquiry is not perceived as a distant, academic luxury but as a vital tool for addressing immediate pedagogical challenges. This, in turn, empowers school-based teacher educators to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession, fostering a more democratic and inclusive renewal where research and practice are inseparable partners in improving educational outcomes for all trainee teachers.

In conclusion, building research capacity among teacher educators is a challenging yet vital endeavour. Our experiences suggest that effective strategies include research training, mentorship, internal funding, writing support, workload recognition, and the cultivation of a research culture. Each of these strategies is necessary, and they are mutually supportive and mutually re-enforcing. By considering these strategies,

arguably universities can build a sustainable and impactful research culture among teacher educators. This not only enhances individual professional development but is also likely to empower educators to contribute to knowledge production, improve teaching practice, and engage with wider conversations about education reforms. Ultimately, a robust research culture enhances the quality and relevance of teacher education programmes and strengthens the profession as a whole. Aligning with Nixon (2009) and seeing research, scholarship and teaching as related aspects of academic practice, we argue, is part of an inclusive academic culture. As such, viewing research and teaching as mutually supportive and mutually reinforcing provides a bulwark against the division and inequity which arise from a binary view and which can impose limitations on career progression and perceptions of the relative value of different aspects of academic work. Also, developing research capacity among teacher educators is central to educating a new generation of school teachers who are 'competent and confident professionals; epistemic agents; able to engage in enquiry-rich practice; and responsible professionals' (UCET, 2020).

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ORCID iDs

Feng Su  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0317-4033>
Margaret Wood  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5067-1978>
Matthew Clarke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4693-248X>

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Author biographies

Feng Su is Associate Professor of Education and Head of the School of Education and Social Sciences at Liverpool Hope University, UK. The prime focus of his current research and writing is academic practice and professional learning in higher education.

Margaret Wood is Associate Professor of Education at York St John University, York, UK. Social justice and inclusive approaches to the development of academic practice are connective themes across her body of work.

Matthew Clarke is Professor of Education at the University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK. His research focuses on developing critical analyses of educational policy and politics with a particular emphasis on how policy shapes the professional work and identities of teachers.