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NEVER MIND THE EDU, WHAT ABOUT THE CATE?: THE BACKGROUND TO CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ENGLISH TEACHER EDUCATION

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If anyone were misguided enough to offer a prize for the sector of English education most subject to government intervention, the institutions concerned with initial teacher training would win it hands down. The intervention (a less polite word would be interference) has, over time, taken three main forms: alterations to the structure and organisation of provision; attempts to match student numbers to subsequent demand; and control over curricular content.

This paper is an attempt to take a relatively long-term view of relevant developments, setting the present situation in its historical context. It will thus necessarily adopt a broad-brush rather than finely detailed approach. It will also focus on the scene in England. What has happened in Wales and Northern Ireland is broadly similar but Scotland has its own independent (and to envious southern eyes more congenial) system.

It is perhaps convenient to begin, by way of scene-setting at least, with the publication towards the end of the Second World War of the McNair Report (Board of Education, 1944). This set up in 1949 to advise ministers on the problem of the shortage of qualified teachers, and on the training and supply of teachers. It was itself equally divided between regrouping of some colleges with universities and other institutions, and the expansion of others to take on general degree work. It proposed the chartering of selected institutions or groups of institutions outside the universities to award their own degrees. And perhaps most significantly, it coupled these suggestions with a reference to “a grave and persistent shortage of teachers” as far ahead as 1960; with the assertion that “the crucial shortages will be in the primary schools”; and with the prediction that “the shortage ... is not merely a present but a chronic disability”.

In the following year, Robbins, alongside its advocacy of a large expansion of higher education as a whole, advanced the proposal for a four-year B.Ed degree to complement the three-year Teacher’s Certificate. The government of the day accepted this recommendation and also accepted one concerning the reorganisation of the existing Joint Examining Bodies. It was itself equally divided between regrouping and consolidation of the existing Joint Examining Boards and creating new university-based Area Training Organisations. Eventually, the argument was settled in favour of the ATOs, and these were set up between 1947 and 1951. The result was to link the many small, single sex colleges more closely with the universities, with a consequent tightening of standards and increase in public confidence (Gosden, 1989). By 1960, this was successfully made to extend the basic course from two years to three, heralding a phase of rapid expansion.

Meanwhile, teacher supply had become the province of the National Advisory Council on the Training and Supply of Teachers, set up in 1949 to advise ministers on “national policy on the training and conditions of qualification of teachers, and on the recruitment and distribution of teachers in ways best calculated to meet the needs of the schools or other educational establishments” (Ministry of Education, 1949). The Council’s Eighth Report (Ministry of Education, 1962) is of particular interest in its concern to look ahead “at least 20 years”. Many of its recommendations anticipated those of the Robbins Report (1963). It called for a further increase in the length of courses to four years, which “should culminate in the award of a degree or of an equivalent qualification”. It suggested a merging of some colleges with universities and other institutions, and the expansion of others to take on general degree work. It proposed the chartering of selected institutions or groups of institutions outside the universities to award their own degrees. And perhaps most significantly, it coupled these suggestions with a reference to “a grave and persistent shortage of teachers” as far ahead as 1980; with the assertion that “the crucial shortages will be in the primary schools”; and with the prediction that “the shortage ... is not merely a present but a chronic disability”.

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The result was a tendency in colleges and university departments to appoint specialist lecturers in the fields concerned. Perhaps predictably, there were not nearly enough well-qualified candidates to go round, and many institutions made do with second-best substitutes. The movement towards disciplinary fundamentalism died a slow but relatively painless death in the 1970s, partly at least as the result of adverse reaction by students to what they saw as meaningless and irrelevant theorising.

At more or less the same time as this was happening - in 1967 - to be precise - a small-scale experiment (later to prove highly significant) was launched in the newly-established University of Sussex. This involved a mainly school-based PGCE programme in which the students spent three days each week in their ‘partnership’ schools and the remaining two in the university working on curriculum planning and reflecting systematically on their classroom experience. In some respects the Sussex scheme could be said to have been inspired by Donald Schön (1983, 1987) in relation to ‘reflective practitioners’. It remained the only programme of its kind until, in the mid-1980s, initiated a closely comparable course in a blaze of publicity.

The next milestone along the tortuous route taken by English teacher training was the publication of the James Report (1972). The preceding Committee of Inquiry was set up in late 1970 by a Secretary of State for Education to examine the report which was aptly retitled “A Framework for Expansion” by the teacher education community. While the expansion of in-service training was accepted as national policy, and the Diploma in Higher Education (DipHE) launched in the newly-established University of Sussex. This involved a mainly school-based PGCE programme in which the students spent three days each week in their ‘partnership’ schools and the remaining two in the university working on curriculum planning and reflecting systematically on their classroom experience. In some respects the Sussex scheme could be said to have been inspired by Donald Schön (1983, 1987) in relation to ‘reflective practitioners’. It remained the only programme of its kind until, in the mid-1980s, initiated a closely comparable course in a blaze of publicity.

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The James Report was given a mixed reception at best. The proposals for a third cycle of inservice education were widely welcomed, but many teacher educators in the colleges strongly opposed the move towards a consecutive, as against a concurrent, pattern of academic study and professional preparation. The proposed maintenance of teacher education as a third distinct sector, alongside the universities and the polytechnics, was not what the Department’s civil servants had wanted or expected. In retrospect, although it helped in certain respects to modify - or at least to stir up - professional opinion, the James Report must be deemed to have been a failure in policy terms.

In any case, it can be said to have been overtaken by events. The fall in the national birth rate, starting in 1964 and continuing well into the 1970s, meant fewer pupils for the schools, and hence fewer teachers. Eleven months after James, in December 1972, the government published a White Paper, entitled A Framework for Expansion, which was aptly retitled “A Frame-up for Contraction” by the teacher education community. While the expansion of in-service training was accepted as national policy, and the Diploma in Higher Education (DipHE) launched in the newly-established University of Sussex. This involved a mainly school-based PGCE programme in which the students spent three days each week in their ‘partnership’ schools and the remaining two in the university working on curriculum planning and reflecting systematically on their classroom experience. In some respects the Sussex scheme could be said to have been inspired by Donald Schön (1983, 1987) in relation to ‘reflective practitioners’. It remained the only programme of its kind until, in the mid-1980s, initiated a closely comparable course in a blaze of publicity.

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A year after this warning shot, the process of reform and change set in motion by events began in earnest. This continued all the way into the next decade, resulting in the outright disappearance of a quarter of the colleges in the 1970s and finally, by the 1982 round of cuts, of nearly a half. Despite the confident numerical projections of 10 years earlier, the numbers of places for initial training were cut from 61,000 in 1971-2 to 6,500 in 1973; a second tranche of cuts announced in 1977 reduced this in stages to under 47,000 by
1981. Only a society now hardened to massive redundancies and persistent unemployment can look back at these events with equanimity. The financial arrangements for severance of employment were relatively generous, but the costs in terms of human misery and blighted careers were high.

The government’s concern to disengage initial teacher education from university control was signalled in 1975 by the abolition of the Area Training Organisations and the reassessment that “outside the universities, teacher education and further education should be assimilated into a common system”. The alternative to the ATOs was to be a network of ‘Professional Committees’ organised on a local or regional basis: but these were not given any real functions to perform, and were for the most part inoperative until some ten years later (see below).

Meanwhile, the National Advisory Council had gone into abeyance; it was replaced by a new Advisory Committee for the Supply and Training of Teachers in 1973. During the course of the 1970s, ASCTT’s main concern was with questions of supply. Towards the end of the decade, however, stimulated at least in part by the decision to phase out the old Certificate of Education in the move towards a fully graduate profession, the debate returned to curricular issues. In 1978 a Working Group of the Council reported on

the extent to which the aims, nature and structure of the existing and planned new-style BEd courses [need] to be reconsidered in the light or recent developments ... which [have] emphasised the need for intending teachers to acquire a body of knowledge which is both professionally adequate and marketable outside teaching. (ASCTT, 1978)

Its report was critical of the wide diversity in the content and organisation of BEd courses, noting the reference in the earlier Green Paper, Education in Schools (DES, 1977), to the lack of satisfactory arrangements for “the development of the content of teacher training and the respective merits of concurrent and consecutive courses, the Working Group came down firmly (if unconfortably) on the fence, noting that “the arguments ... are fairly evenly balanced. It must be for the individual institutions to decide which structure is the more appropriate for it”. It also noted, however, that the proportion of newly qualified teachers with a PGCE (the main ‘consecutive’ route) would have risen from 24% of the total in 1974 to an expected 53% in 1981. The fragmentation of initial training programmes between educational studies (the general theory element), professional studies (the consideration of issues relating to school practice), subject studies (covering the aspects of required academic knowledge) and teaching practice was one of the main curricular concerns at this time. Two particular issues - the problems of reconciling academic and professional goals and the difficulties of relating theory to practice in the secondary PGCE - were the subject of a timely publication by the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (1979). UCET, incidentally, has been an important moderating influence on official policy, representing a voluntary association of all university departments of education and playing an active role in shaping and not merely reflecting professional opinion. (It has in the past worked largely through informal channels, though recent events have forced it to adopt a more public and political stance.)

In retrospect, the 1970s may be seen as a high point of governmental intervention in the initial teacher education system. The earlier network of mostly quite small and often highly specialised colleges was replaced, in a more or less drastic manner, by a system in which much of teacher education was incorporated into the universities and polytechnics, or conducted in larger, amalgamated colleges of higher education or further education colleges which also provided a range of other degree and sub-degree programmes. Now that the BEd had been formally introduced through the system it might seem as if further large-scale structural reorganisation is not on the current agenda. Nowadays, however, to make any such assertion is to offer a hostage to fortune.

The reshaping process was in large part itself a consequence of manpower planning: as noted, the reduction in the projected numbers of pupils to be trained led to a need for the number of teachers being trained. It was an ironic but telling demonstration of the inefficacy of such planning that it was not able to take into account the backwash effect on applicants. Much as the DES Statistics Branch, which provided the data on which teacher projects were based, while continuing to publish periodic information on the supply by position, appeared to lose any confidence it might earlier have possessed in specifying future needs.

The advent in 1979 of a government dedicated to promotion of ‘market forces’ was in any case a natural evolution in the recent tendency has been for a relatively loosely controlled allocation of training places coupled with special incentives (in the form of bursaries or loans) offered to applicants for subjects where there is thought to be a shortage of already qualified teachers. Even this policy has had its limitations, with initial employment rates in some cases largely for “shortage” subjects than for those which are thought to be better staffed. The government’s line of argument, however, seems to be that graduates with a teaching qualification, even if not subsequently engaged in teaching, ought to be retrained in the labour market, and to that extent their higher education and training are not in vain.

The net effect of the government’s withdrawal from setting national plans for the complex of its programme of restructuring was to leave curricular issues as the most obvious remaining focus of attention. The initial moves in this direction in the late 1970s, to which brief reference has been made, the DES’s BEd Advisory Panel, which had been set up to advise on the development of teacher education in the move towards a fully graduate profession, the debate returned to curricular issues. In 1978 a Working Group of the Council reported on

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starting point of a review of all existing initial teacher training courses. The implicit expectation was that DES approval would be withdrawn from those courses which failed to satisfy the conditions thus laid down.

In April 1984 the DES issued a circular which embodied a sharpened and amplified set of criteria (DES, 1984) and accepted a further recommendation from ACSET that a new Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE) be set up "to advise the Secretaries of State for Education and Science and for Wales on the approval of initial teacher training courses in England and Wales". The Council was expected to review all existing courses, and to scrutinise any proposals for new courses, within three or four years, after which its future would be reconsidered. It was intended to take into account "evidence based on any visits made by members of the Council ... and in all cases the findings of HMI visits".

In the event, the Council organised very few visits to institutions (limiting them mostly to cases where there was a crucial ambiguity to resolve or a potential decision to close a significant area of provision); its reliance on HMI reports was in consequence extremely heavy, according the Inspectorate rather too much power for the good of the Council.

Among the requirements which went well beyond the 1983 White Paper proposals was one specifying a minimum length of 36 weeks for PGCE courses (a record of which had previously been modelled on the universities' traditional 39 weeks of 200 hours). The then Secretary of State, Sir Keith Joseph, had apparently argued for 44 weeks, but had been persuaded by his DES officials to accept the lower compromise (Gosden, 1989). The semimonthly meetings were also given a new lease of life, in that no course would be considered by CATE unless it had the blessing of a committee, meeting regularly, whose members must include local school teachers, members from the relevant local education authorities and individuals drawn from industry, commerce or the lay public. Another key requirement, affecting primary courses, was that there must be at least 100 hours of study of mathematics and 200 hours of study of English language teaching. Other, perhaps less demanding, specifications in the seventeen paragraphs setting out the criteria dealt with professionalism (including, predictably, "understanding the dimensions of contemporary society"), entry requirements, and special shortened undergraduate courses for already partially-qualified applicants.

The Council's membership was appointed on a personal rather than a representative basis, and reflected the government's concern to ensure that teacher educators had only a marginal role. As a result, the Council, which, as Principal of London University and subsequently as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hull. Other founding members of CATE included two businessmen and a journalist, two local politicians, two academics (not associated with teacher education), two teacher union officials, three local education authority officers, two heads and a senior teacher, three principals of non-university institutions providing teacher education, and one member of university staff (the present author) currently engaged in the process. (A detailed account of CATE and its activities between 1984 and 1989 is to be found in Macintyre, 1991). In the early stages, several representations were made to the Council about the inequity or inappropriateness of particular criteria. For example, the requirement for "recent and relevant experience" was so specific that two out of the three to four years of experience had to be spent teaching in schools - yet no budgetary provision whatever was made in institutions having to face the substantial part of the existing provision that many of courses had had to be revised and resubmitted, and some individual programmes had had to be discontinued. The low failure rate could perhaps be seen as a vindication of the quality of the teacher education programmes which existed when CATE was set up - though the evidence was that some programmes served to promote critical self-evaluation and to tighten certain procedures to the benefit of the system as a whole.

The outcome was that, when the question arose of a possible reconstitution and continuation of the Council, the teacher education community tended towards the conclusion that CATE had done more good than harm and had established a system which at least provided a public assurance that proper standards were being maintained. A very different view was taken by the extreme right wing of the Conservative party, who had - in the absence of any direct knowledge about the subject - come firmly to the view that the teacher training system should be abolished, and that prospective teachers should learn their craft in the classrooms of specially-designated 'training schools'. The generally favourable judgement of school-based 'articled teachers' followed a year or so after that of the second-stage teachers. The Council was doubtless also involved in the lead-in to the dramatic events in the first half of 1992. The earliest intimations of yet another of the Tory government's steps towards the deconstruction of British society came in January 1992, when the then Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Clarke, mentioned in a speech that he intended to change the existing pattern of secondary PGCE courses with one in which the schools would take the dominant role. The change was to be implemented by September 1992. The government had in fact earlier introduced an experimental scheme under which school-based 'articled teachers' followed a two-year programme including some systematic course provision, but this had turned out to cost three times as much as the average PGCE course, and to lead to a public complaint of confusion within what came to be termed, with happy irony, 'the education establishment'.

Vocal as they were, these critics were not to have their day. The government's proposal for the first phase could not be expected to continue, the local committees - reconstituted where necessary to include more than one but preferably not more than three institutions - would be given the task of scrutinising new courses and reviewing existing ones which had not been looked at for four or five years, and forwarding their recommendations to the Council. This would free CATE members to a certain degree, enabling them to give some attention to development work and the identification and promotion of good practice within the system.

The Chairman - by this time dubbed Sir William Taylor - was to continue, as were four other politically correct members of the original Council. Among the other 12 (the total of 16 being two fewer than before) were at least two of the right-wing opponents previously mentioned. The Chairman had represented a relatively low profile in the first two years of its existence. One might suppose that part of the reason was the need to work out appropriate relationships with the local committees, which themselves inevitably took some time to re-establish and get into action. However, the Council was doubtless also involved in the lead-in to the dramatic events in the first half of 1992.
Shortly afterwards, a consultative paper was issued spelling out the details and calling for responses from interested parties. In the last few years, the notion of governmental consultation has experienced a change under which those, however numerous, who responded by commenting on proposals were rewarded by seeing the original intentions faithfully maintained. This case offered a rare exception to the rule, partly perhaps because the consultation period was interrupted by a general election, followed by the appointment of a new Secretary of State. A face-saving modification of the original proposals proved possible, and was certainly desirable in the light of the overwhelming volume of objections, not only from the universities, polytechnics and colleges concerned, but from the teachers' associations and individual head teachers (who did not consider this consultation as a test of their schools equipped to take on the task) and from parents' groups and school governors (who did not want inexperienced teachers launched into taking classes unsupervised). Even within the DES, two senior civil servants were transferred from responsibility for teacher education to other duties because they were seen to be insufficiently enthusiastic about the policy that had been proposed.

The new Secretary of State's decision was not announced until the end of June. Meanwhile, in the expectation that all institutions would need to implement the change in a very short time-span, the higher education funding bodies called for privileges to each training institution to put in bids for a fund set aside to meet the transition costs from the existing to the new system. Given that no-one knew the ground rules, this was a spectacular pointless exercise. The whole bidding process had to be repeated when the revised arrangements were announced, allowing a week for the necessary costings to be worked out and submitted. Even the normally moderate UCET Annual Report commented on the process as a whole that "real problems have been caused by the speed by which it was supposed to be put into effect and the generally disorganised way in which it has been imposed" (UCET, 1992).

In the event, the proposals for school-based training activity were scaled down from the original four-fifths to two-thirds - not far off the already established pattern of the Sussex and Oxford courses. The requirement for 24 weeks in school was also applied to two and three year secondary undergraduate courses; part-time PGCE courses had to allow 18 weeks, and four-year undergraduate courses 32 weeks. The necessary changes had to come into effect not later than 1st September 1994 - another significant modification of the earlier demand. At the same time, the system which CATE was instructed to operate was substantially altered. The local committees were disbanded; instead institutions were to be accredited in respect of all their courses every five years, on the basis of a development plan and full inspection. Under new terms of reference perhaps better suited to the present period, the GATE had to advise the Secretary of State on whether or not institutions should be accredited; to 'identify and disseminate good practice'; to keep the criteria under review and advise on possible changes to them; and "to advise the Secretary of State as requested on other matters relating to ITT".

The criteria themselves were completely rewritten, a number of them in the currently fashionable form of 'competency' statements. In the preamble to Circular No. 9/92 (DES 1992) which set out the new arrangements, it was noted that "primary phase courses ... are currently under review". Their turn for massive disruption is expected to come early in 1993. It is also noteworthy that the only specific reference to the role of higher education institutions abounds them an administrative rather than a pedagogic function: they are designated as "responsible for ensuring that courses meet the requirements for academic validation, presenting courses for accreditation, awarding qualifications to successful students, and arranging student placements in more than one school". By implication, they are not actually expected to teach students anything during the 40 days in which they are not in one 'partner school' or another.

It remains to be seen how the new arrangements develop, as institutions make the substantial transition involved for many of them to predominantly school-based courses. Only a handful of teacher training departments are expected to begin new-style provision in the 1992/93 academic year, but many more will be gearing themselves for this change in 1993, while the remainder - if they are to survive - will have to fall in line the year after. Meanwhile, two observations on the present position can be made with some confidence, the first concerning the recent past and the second the short to medium term future.

On the first, the government and its agents - the Higher Education Funding Council and the Department of Education and Science (now renamed, somewhat misleadingly in view of its record, the Department for Education) - have managed the events between January and June 1992 with a degree of ineptitude bordering on the spectacular. If a teacher training institution had shown anything approaching the same capacity to mishandle its affairs, it would certainly have been closed down without the option of an appeal. It seems clear, however, that in contemporary politics, the buck does not stop with the Minister, but is instead passed neatly back down the line. Demands for accountability are not taken to apply to Westminster and Whitehall.

On the second point, those who campaigned so strenuously to replace teacher education with teacher apprenticeship saw, under Kenneth Clarke's generally unloved leadership, their prize almost within their grasp. Although they must have felt some degree of frustration and disappointment at the turn events have subsequently taken, it should not be assumed that they have given up the struggle. Their campaign has never been one that paid needless or inconvenient attention to the facts, and it will doubtless be possible to convince their political masters in due course that things have not yet gone far enough. The longer the present administration survives, the greater the prospect of continuing future reform. UK-watchers should keep any eye open for yet another new dawn.

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