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**Allison, Jordan ORCID: 0000-0001-8513-4646 (2023)  
Fragmentation or focus? The precarious nature of initial  
teacher training within the english further education sector.  
PRACTICE, 5 (1). pp. 27-40.  
doi:10.1080/25783858.2023.2177559**

Official URL: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25783858.2023.2177559>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/25783858.2023.2177559>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/12367>

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# Fragmentation or focus? The precarious nature of initial teacher training within the english further education sector

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## ABSTRACT

There has been an increased emphasis on how teacher quality impacts the effectiveness of student learning, and this has placed a greater focus on the effectiveness of teacher preparation programmes. Meanwhile, there has been a general neglect of the English further education (FE) sector both politically, and in academic research. Therefore, this paper considers the current position of initial teacher training (ITT) for the further education sector, amidst recent educational policy developments to improve the consistency and quality of the provision of teacher education. This paper first considers the political changes that have impacted this setting since New Labour came into power in 1997 and draws on reports of how teacher preparation programmes have evolved and been delivered during this time. It is argued that given the lack of cohesion of educational policy that has seemingly plagued the FE sector, this trend is likely to continue, but government rhetoric is certainly indicating that the new developments for initial teacher training may have a more lasting effect. However, this paper concludes that if the changes are to last, there are some key factors which must be considered, including that of political consensus and stability for the sector.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 November 2021  
Accepted 03 February 2023

## KEYWORDS

Initial teacher training;  
further education; teacher  
education; educational  
policy; teacher preparation

## Introduction

The Further Education (FE) sector in England, or as previously known as the ‘Post-Compulsory Education Sector’ or ‘Lifelong Learning Sector’ has undergone some frequent and radical changes over the past couple of decades (Burnell 2017), with multiple authors citing the problems being faced. These include being succumb to frequent and fleeting policy interventions (Lahiff 2015, Norris and Adam 2017), reforms surrounding governance, funding, qualifications, and regulatory reviews of education practice (James Relly and Laczik 2021). That said, the FE sector forms a major part of English education, and what has not changed over time is how the FE sector provides an extremely wide range of education and training courses for both young people and adults (Crawley 2012, O’Leary and Brooks 2014, Lahiff 2015, Greatbatch and Tate 2018, Augar *et al.* 2019), resulting in their remit and mission harder to identify and defend (Orr 2020).

Given the variety of the students they serve, and that government reports have stated that the FE sector should be at the forefront of providing learners with the tools and

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opportunities required to progress into skilled employment (Augar *et al.* 2019, HM Treasury 2020), this places a greater importance on the quality of teaching and learning that takes place. Therefore, as interpreters of local and national policy (Middleton 2019), this places a greater focus on the quality and knowledge of teachers, and hence, the implementation and effectiveness of teacher preparation programmes (Armoni 2011, Darling-Hammond 2017). High quality teacher education is something that is urgently required worldwide (Tack and Vanderlinde 2014, Mayer and Oancea 2021), and has become top of education policy agendas as nations have become convinced of how teacher quality impacts on student achievement (Darling-Hammond 2017). However, the process of how policy intervention leads to eventual impact is characterised by a plethora of decision actors, and there is a dichotomy of intent versus impact.

Any political system cannot simultaneously comprehend all issues that are being faced, with policy subsystems being tasked to consider issues within their respective community of experts (True *et al.* 2019). However, there is not necessarily a one-size fits all approach, and multiple authors have reflected on how interventions to educational policy within England have impacted teacher expertise, professionalism, and autonomy (Lucas *et al.* 2013, Rayner and Gunter 2020, Ellis *et al.* 2021). However, initial teacher training (ITT) within the English FE sector in particular has historically been seen as lacking in academic research (Orr and Simmons 2010), and despite its large scale, has been identified as not earning the respect it deserves (Crawley 2012). Furthermore, more recent reports from the Department for Education have highlighted how ITT forms a key part in the supply and quality of educators in the FE sector (Department for Education 2021b), but providers have explained how they are not confident that their trained staff will be of a consistent standard after their teacher training (Department for Education 2021c). While this could be related to a number of issues related to the learners, some authors also bring to attention the importance of the quality and skill of the teachers teaching the trainees (Tack and Vanderlinde 2014). Meanwhile, other authors contend that teachers in the UK are operating in a system where the notion of failure overshadows the discourse (Middleton 2019). Therefore, given the uncertainty surrounding the future of FE, and the quality of ITT, this paper will aim to answer the following research question:

What are the political and educational contexts that have influenced the success of initial teacher training in the further education sector both over time, and for 2022 onwards?

To answer this research question, this paper will explore the changes that have taken place regarding education policy since New Labour came to power in 1997, and how these regulatory changes have impacted both the FE sector and ITT. Studies regarding ITT at different points in time of this history will be explored simultaneously before reflecting on what the current situation is for ITT in FE and contemplating what will happen next. However, it is first important to identify some of the key differences between ITT for those entering schools versus FE.

### **Schools' vs further education for initial teacher training**

Compared to schools and the higher education sector, ITT for the FE sector has been lacking in attention (Burnell 2017). For instance, historically, while it has been a statutory

requirement for school teachers to gain qualified teacher learning status (QTLS), this has not always been the case for those teaching in the FE sector (Orr and Simmons 2010). Traditionally many teachers in FE have instead entered the sector as a second career and complete any training on the job or part time (Bathmaker and Avis 2005, Orr and Simmons 2010), with entry to the profession being described as happenstance, as opposed to a planned professional journey (Lahiff 2015). ITT for the FE sector has remained in a state of flux. For those on ITT programmes for FE, trainees are grouped together, whereas in schools, trainees are grouped by subject area (Lucas *et al.* 2013). Therefore, while the training for prospective FE trainees reflects the diverse nature of learners which FE caters for, it means that learners may not have the opportunity to acquire the relevant pedagogical content knowledge for their own subject area in as much depth, yet this has been identified as a fundamental part of teacher preparation programmes (Armoni 2011). This ultimately can impact on the quality of teaching in practice. However, this situation reflects the neglect which FE has been subject to over time, as schools have had much greater regimes of teacher qualifications, regulation and inspection (Burnell 2017), and a greater amount of public spending afforded to them (Orr 2020). That said, the history of the FE sector and ITT has had its fair share of policy reform and change, which will now be explored in greater depth.

### History of initial teacher training in further education

In the policy notes for the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill (Department for Education 2021b), the UK government proposes measures to improve the consistency and quality of ITT within the FE sector, and states that:

Practice across the system is not uniformly good, and the ITT offer is too fragmented, difficult to navigate and not always based on sufficiently clear quality standards.

(Department for Education 2021b, p28)

While this policy acknowledges how ITT in the FE sector may be poor as of 2021, this is certainly not a ground-breaking discovery, with ITT within FE being a longstanding concern both in white papers and academic literature. For instance, early studies such as that from Bathmaker and Avis (2005), investigated the professional identity of a group of 43 trainee lecturers completing their ITT during the academic year 1999–2000. The authors found that the trainees did not become part of an experienced community of practice, but instead they were marginalised with some of the trainees explaining how they felt like they were treated as outsiders. The experience of the trainees felt at this time could be explained by the uncertainty caused by the changing political context at the time.

### New labour and a change to education

Under the Blair Labour government victory in 1997, a main objective for the national agenda was to improve education standards (Burnell 2017). Shortly after the victory, the Fryer and Kennedy Reports were published which both called for improvements in the quality of teaching and learning (Tight 1998). This included the identification of the need

for nationally recognised teacher training for the FE sector (Orr and Simmons 2010, Lucas *et al.* 2013). Moreover, at this time, the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) was founded (Norris and Adam 2017) with the goal of developing and maintaining the National Curriculum and associated assessments, tests and examinations. Meanwhile, there was the launch of the Teaching and Higher Education Act (1998) which called for the establishment of General Teaching Councils, ‘with respect to the registration, qualifications and training of teachers and the inspection of such training’. Two years later, there was also the launch of the Learning and Skills Act (2000) which called for the abolishment of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and the establishment of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) which became responsible for the planning and funding in FE (Burnell 2017).

It was only the year after the Bathmaker and Avis (2005) study on teacher trainees (i.e. 2001) that a teaching qualification became mandatory for new entrants to the profession (Lahiff 2015, James Relly and Laczik 2021), with many college lecturers previously being employed due to the vocational skills they had in other occupations (Bathmaker and Avis 2005). Hence, many of those teaching within FE at the time may have been lacking in sufficient pedagogic training due to coming from a range of non-teaching backgrounds (Orr and Simmons 2010, Crawley 2012). It was also suggested that the experienced lecturers had become overstretched and demoralised due to poor workplace conditions, a lack of management support and a lack of sufficient resources (Bathmaker and Avis 2005). It should therefore come as no surprise that a teacher trainee entering this environment may not have the most optimal experience.

Some initiatives were later introduced to help improve the situation for ITT and FE more generally. One government reform was to introduce a system of inspection through placing the FE sector under the remit of the non-ministerial department of Ofsted (The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills), and this prompted FE colleges to implement their own institutional policies of observing teaching and learning (Burnell 2017). Furthermore, in 2002 the Institute for Learning (IfL) was formed by teachers and others as the professional body for teachers in the FE and skills sector (Learning and Skills Improvement Service 2010). The IfL could award Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills status and supported teachers as dual professionals. Or in other words, in becoming experts in both teaching methods (pedagogy knowledge), and being up to date in their subject area (content knowledge) (Learning and Skills Improvement Service 2010). That said, through a major national survey on FE teacher education in 2003, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate concluded that the existing system was unsatisfactory, with a huge variation in the quality of teacher training (Lucas *et al.* 2013). Clearly there needed to be greater clarity and organisation in these initiatives’ implementation.

To alleviate some of these issues, later, in 2007, a variety of regulations were introduced. The Further Education and Training Act (2007) was passed, which restructured the LSC to operate at a regional level, and placed duties on the LSC to encourage more diversity and choice in education and training. Furthermore, under the Education Act of 2002, the Further Education Teachers’ Qualifications (England) Regulations 2007 and the Further Education Teachers’ Continuing Professional Development and Registration (England) Regulations 2007 were introduced (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2012). These regulations helped support the reforms of mandatory teacher training qualifications, and presented the expectation for teachers to join the Institute for

Learning, as the preferred professional body (Lahiff 2015). Part of the requirements also included the need for teachers to complete a qualification that led to QTLS status (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2012), and to complete at least 30 hours of continuing professional development each year (Broad 2015).

There were some other regulatory and organisational changes soon after the 2007 regulations. For instance, there was the founding of the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) which took over part of the functions of the QCDA in April 2008, and later on in November 2009, there was the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act (2009), which created a statutory apprenticeship framework, but also called for the abolishment of the LSC. Thereafter in April 2010, the LSC was disbanded and replaced by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) (Burnell 2017) and the Young Peoples Learning Agency (YPLA). The frequency of changes to educational policy in Britain, and the frequent changes to roles and responsibilities of organisations has been well documented in academic literature (Norris and Adam 2017). This prevalence for change seems unlikely to stop moving forward, with what seemingly appears to be frequent and fleeting changes to policy and regulatory bodies.

Although some organisational and policy changes were positive for ITT, as time progressed, the situation for teacher trainees sparsely improved. For instance, through a qualitative research project investigating two FE colleges in 2009, Orr and Simmons (2010) explored the dual identities of in-service teacher trainees who were undertaking either an in-service Certificate in Education (Cert. Ed.), or a Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course. The authors found that while the trainees found their ITT course positive overall, the trainees felt that the class sessions were the only place where they could admit any frustrations or mistakes as otherwise it would expose weakness, and call to question their suitability as a teacher in FE settings (Orr and Simmons 2010). This certainly supports the findings of Bathmaker and Avis (2005) regarding trainees being marginalised or treated as outsiders, and does not serve as a motivating finding for prospective FE teacher trainees wanting to enter the sector.

Other studies at this time indicated the extent of how varied ITT was implemented for those wanting to teach in the FE sector. Through a study of twenty providers of ITT in 2009, it was found how there was a lack of standardisation regarding requirements to enter the profession, a wide variation in assessment, few opportunities to develop subject specific pedagogy, and a wide variation in the academic levels of qualifications and titles awarded (Lucas *et al.* 2013). Hence, with such little consistency in ITT, the problems that existed prior to the regulatory reforms remained. To illustrate this point, the authors eloquently stated:

Our research indicates that the lofty aspirations expressed in government reforms to improve FE teacher training and to achieve parity of esteem between school and FE teachers have not been achieved. An over-complex regulatory framework based upon statutory regulation, standards and assessment units has not led to greater consistency and is confusing for those responsible for designing ITT courses to meet the needs of trainees and those that they teach.

(Lucas *et al.* 2013, p693)

Other authors conducting studies at the time also came to similar conclusions regarding other aspects of teacher training such as professional development. For instance, through

drawing on a 2009/2010 study of forty-seven questionnaires and six in depth interviews, Broad (2015) explored the barriers for teachers in the FE sector to engage in continuing professional development (CPD). She found that legislation was the main driver for CPD, with teachers being hindered by diminishing working conditions, and how the sector is organised, structured and funded (Broad 2015). These findings were replicated in later studies regarding teacher observation too. A study of ten FE colleges in 2011 was conducted to explore observation as a tool to assess, monitor and raise standards of classroom performance for teachers (O'Leary and Brooks 2014). It was found how peer observation had become marginalised, and that what should be a reward system, instead led to superficial approaches to learning (O'Leary and Brooks 2014), with the authors stating:

FE has outgrown an assessment system that may have served a purpose at a time when too many staff had no professional training or recognised teaching qualification. 'Upskilling' over the last decade has established within FE a greater awareness of the principles and practice of continuous improvement in teaching and learning. However, a workplace culture in which this can flourish is needed.

(O'Leary and Brooks 2014, p544)

Despite the best efforts of government to improve the FE sector and ITT, problems still occurred, with the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2012) explaining how the regulatory regime to govern professionalism in the FE sector since the early 2000s had lacked in scope, enforceability and sector support. Unfortunately, this only led to further policy reforms and change.

### **2012: the end of mandatory training**

In 2012, the government decided to revoke the Further Education workforce regulations that were introduced in 2007, subject to a public consultation (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2012). This meant the regulations relating to FE teachers' qualifications were revoked, and that the requirement to engage with 30 hours of continued professional development was ceased (Broad 2015). This was done to ensure it was easier to recruit industry professionals since there became no prescribed professional status or levels of qualification required to teach in the FE sector (Augar *et al.* 2019). This government decision did not receive a favourable response. In the public consultation of the decision, 74% of respondents were in favour of retaining the qualification regulations (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2012), with respondents concerned on how it would impact the ability of providers to sufficiently support their learners. The final output was in some ways a middle ground.

The regulations that set core requirements for minimum qualifications was retained for a further year (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2012). Meanwhile the Lingfield report, which was established by the Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, and focused on developing national occupational standards for teaching staff in the FE sector, did provide some recommendations for teacher qualifications moving forward. This included the recommendation that in-service teaching qualifications should not be abolished but instead reformed under the leadership of the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) (Balchin 2012). Furthermore, this

report advised a level 5 ‘Certificate in Further Education’, and a level 7 ‘Diploma in Further Education’ qualification to help those who wish to teach at the highest professional levels (Balchin 2012).

Once more, despite good intentions, these changes led to confusion and concern. One report indicates how these changes to regulations for ITT qualifications led to a lack of clarity for what level and type of training is appropriate for new teachers (Augar *et al.* 2019). The authors further explain how this led to a significant variation in teacher training, and that these differences made it difficult to ascertain a strong teacher supply pipeline for those wanting to enter the sector (Augar *et al.* 2019). While this report reflected on the past, authors at the time also spoke of great concern. Most notable is that of Crawley (2012) who states:

At the time of writing, Lifelong Learning Initial Teacher Education (LL ITE) is on the brink of a possible disaster, probably a new beginning and certainly a journey into new and uncharted territory. This article firstly introduces the extremely difficult situation which LL ITE finds itself in midway through 2012.

(Crawley 2012, p1)

Uncharted territory was certainly an accurate estimation, with Crawley (2012) suggesting that the Lingfield report recommendations would reduce the capacity of teacher education in improving teaching and learning, while also suggesting how ‘we must design the future, not return to the past’. However, later papers discuss how the training of teachers for the FE sector is full of uncertainty with the feeling of ‘having come full circle’ being persistent both in the system (Lahiff 2015), and in the FE sector more generally, especially regarding policy reinvention (Norris and Adam 2017). For example, only two years after its introduction, the YPLA was replaced by the Education Funding Agency (EFA) in 2012, while in July 2013, funding for the LSIS was discontinued after being in operation for just five years. However, in October 2013 the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) was founded as a registered charity that focused on professional development and standards in FE. Meanwhile, in the following October of 2014, the IfL ceased operating, and then the ETF absorbed the responsibilities of issuing QTLS status for teachers in FE. Significantly, the issuing of QTLS was predicated on teachers being members of the Society for Education and Training (SET), paying the necessary fee, and taking part in annual CPD.

Studies of ITT in FE around this time indicate how teacher trainees required more support than they were being given. One case study which focused on the use, value, and practice of the teacher observation process within FE concluded that teachers need the opportunity and time to develop their practice with others who can mediate their learning as part of a wider programme of learning from practice (Lahiff 2015). The author further explains how this learning space is particularly useful for those teachers who are transitioning from a vocational context and learning to become teachers. A similar case study paper explored the implementation of the policy of observing teaching and learning by focusing on one college (Burnell 2017). They concluded that there is now a greater need than ever for FE lecturers to be on par with school teachers, and that the current system of observation should be overhauled and designed in a more effective, supportive and collaborative way (Burnell 2017). Both papers implicitly suggest



how the current support networks are limited for ITT, yet other authors are perhaps more explicit in their views of the FE sector overall. For example, one study which considered the role of academy schools as part of the employability agenda suggested that ‘The Further Education sector in England appears to be devoid of a coherent philosophy of education’ (Ingleby and Tummons 2017, p19). These claims are difficult to argue with when considering the further political changes that took place around the time of the article.

Almost two years after the Conservative party majority government came into power in May 2015, both the SFA and EFA were abolished in March 2017 and replaced by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), which now provides funding for all colleges. At the same time, the Technical and Further Education Act (2017) was passed which laid out a framework for college insolvency while the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), called for the abolishment of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and the establishment of the Office for Students (OfS) and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). While the link between ITT and these changes may initially not appear obvious, it should be noted how these changes may have influenced the funding and capacity for higher education providers to offer ITT courses. Furthermore, the frequent changes to regulatory and non-departmental public bodies may have also caused general confusion to institutions due to the lack of consistency.

### **Initial teacher training in further education: what now and where next?**

As shown in the previous section, it is clear that the FE sector has been plagued by changes, with Orr (2020) explaining how since the 1980s there have been 28 major pieces of legislation, and over 50 secretaries of state with responsibility for the sector. Unfortunately, the FE sector remains underfunded now and vulnerable to further policy changes (Augar *et al.* 2019, Orr 2020), and this impacts both on teacher recruitment, and ITT. Over the past few years, various reports have concluded how colleges are suffering from recruitment difficulties (Zaidi *et al.* 2017, Association of Colleges 2018b, Department for Education 2020, 2021c), but this should not come as a surprise given that average pay for teachers in the FE sector has been reported as up to £7000 less than that of within schools (Association of Colleges 2018a), £13,000 less than higher education lecturers (Augar *et al.* 2019), while salaries in industry for technical subjects can be even higher (Orr 2020). This certainly does not serve as an enticing offer for prospective teacher trainees looking to enter the sector. This is particularly the case given the other issues that have been found to occur for teacher trainees, in addition to the complex and differing qualifications available for study for those looking to enter the sector.

Current qualifications for those wishing to teach in FE range from level 3 all the way through to level 7 (Greatbatch and Tate 2018). For instance, there are short courses at level 3 such as the Award in Education and Training (AET). At level 4 are more in-depth courses such as the six-month course of the Certificate in Education and Training (CET), whereas at level 5, there is the Diploma in Education and Training (DET) which is one of the main routes for teaching in the FE sector, and is typically a one-year full time course costing up to £6000 (Greatbatch and Tate 2018). Furthermore, there is also the level 7 PGCE/CertEd in post-compulsory education and training (PCET) that is also a one-year full time course, but this requires participants to already have a degree (or equivalent),

and English and mathematics GCSEs grade 4 (C) or above. This course can cost up to £9000 if self-funded, but there are bursaries or scholarships available for prospective trainees looking to teach certain defined subject areas in the FE sector for the academic year 2021–2022 (Department for Education 2021a).

The bursaries available for the FE sector differ to those available for teaching in schools, and the bursary amount available differs for each subject area. For those teaching Mathematics, Science (which includes Biology, Chemistry, and/or Physics), Engineering (and/or Manufacturing), or Computing, a bursary of £26,000 is available (Department for Education 2021a). For those wanting to specialise on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), a bursary of £15,000 is available, and for English, £12,000 is available. However, for any other subjects, funding is not provided (Department for Education 2021a), and this partly indicates the UK governments' priorities for education.

Offering financial subsidies and incentives has been identified as a leading practice internationally to ensure the recruitment of prospective teacher trainees (Darling-Hammond 2017). Meanwhile, reforms to the FE sector have shown the impact that FE institutions can have on national productivity (Smothers *et al.* 2021), and hence, it is no surprise that there is now an increased focus on the quality and recruitment of FE teacher trainees. However, as has often been the case, English policy has frequently been very reactive. True *et al.* (2019) in their discussion of punctuated-equilibrium theory, which is where political processes are characterised by periods of stability and incrementalism, in addition to short intense periods of instability and change, suggest that information processing is often disproportionate by policymakers. That is, given the information available, there are alternating periods of underreaction to what is going on, followed by periods of overreaction (True *et al.* 2019). When applying this theory to ITT in the FE sector, it could be argued that generally over the past couple of decades, there have been many periods of underreaction, with these bursaries now forming part of the overreaction in trying to enact change. In fact, these bursaries formed part of a wider investment strategy of over £65 million on the FE workforce for 2021–2022 to ensure that the FE sector can recruit, develop and retain the teaching staff they need (Department for Education 2021b). This strategy included a national recruitment campaign, a tailored professional development offer, and comprehensive workforce data collection (Department for Education 2021b).

While these changes can be seen as a positive, it is important to consider the motives behind those who are in power to enact such change. Through the consideration of 'policy churn' that has taken place within England, Norris and Adam (2017) suggest that some policy changes can stem from the motivation of policymakers and ministers to 'make their mark' which may not happen if they do not suggest some radical change. This is in stark contrast to some other countries such as that of Finland, a country which has been highlighted as exhibiting patience and consistency in education policy, waiting through a generation to measure the efficacy of any major educational reform (Chung 2015). What is consistent within Finland is that they have high-quality and highly educated teachers (Chung 2015), which originates through a continuous process of enhancement-led quality assurance and having historically high standards for the quality of teachers (Niemi and Lavonen 2020). For example, all teachers must complete a two to three year masters' degree before even entering the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond 2017). Of course, there is variation across other countries, but Darling-

Hammond (2017) further explain how there is some regularities across university-based pre-service teacher training programmes in countries such as Canada, Australia and the United States. Nevertheless, England perhaps has some lessons to learn from taking a more consistent and planned approach to educational policy. That said, given the problems that have been found to exist for ITT in the FE sector, there are clearly some issues that need resolving, and finally, the UK government is beginning to act.

In addition to the wider investment strategy to support the FE workforce, the UK government are also proposing other changes. For instance, while there is not currently any legislation to provide regulation and standards for ITT in FE, the government is now in the process of legislating to create a reserve power to be able more effectively manage and shape the market of provision for ITT in FE (Department for Education 2021b). This will not place any new requirements on teacher trainees, but will include a new set of revised employer-led standards for FE teaching which will later support the redevelopment of ITT qualifications (Department for Education 2021b). In addition to this, it has also been confirmed that Ofsted's future inspections will also cover all publicly funded FE ITT, not just that which is validated by universities (Department for Education 2021b). On the face of it, these certainly provide marked potential improvements.

Importantly, potential improvements are just that, they have potential. However, when drawing on another concept of punctuated-equilibrium theory; bounded rationality, this stresses how decision-makers are subject to cognitive limitations when making choices, in that policymakers cannot consider all problems at the same time (True *et al.* 2019). Hence, regardless of these initiatives to support ITT in the FE sector, these could become unstuck due to other policy interventions or changes to the macroenvironment. For instance, it has been reported how there have been proposals to take colleges under some form of regional 'public ownership' (Orr 2020), while curricula change such as the introduction of T-Levels (Augar *et al.* 2019), can potentially distort the skillsets required of prospective teachers. These factors would therefore necessitate yet more change, albeit on a perhaps smaller level. This of course, is more akin to the incrementalism in punctuated-equilibrium theory (True *et al.* 2019), and while the past does not predict the future, it is hard to neglect the chequered past that has shadowed previous educational reforms within England. Will these initiatives form just another failed attempt at improving teacher education, or will they serve as the foundations for a prosperous ITT setting for the FE sector? Only time will tell for sure, but government rhetoric is certainly indicating a positive direction for the future (Department for Education 2021a, 2021c):

We need a consistently high-quality initial teacher education offer in further education. There is some outstanding initial teacher education in parts of the further education sector, based on clear quality standards and supporting well-structured career development opportunities. However, in our engagement with a range of initial teacher education providers and further education providers we have been told that practice across the system is not uniformly good, and that the initial teacher education offer is too fragmented, difficult to navigate and not always based on sufficiently clear quality standards. Now is the time for government to take a more active role in challenging the status quo and providing better oversight of the initial teacher education system, ensuring that public funding goes only to high-quality provision based on clear employer-led standards.

(Department for Education 2021c, p63)

## Conclusion

From an international perspective, some policies for initial teacher trainees focus on regulating requirements for those entering the sector, while some policies focus more on developing standards of what it is teachers should know and be able to do (Mayer and Oancea 2021). This reflects the differences that exist for teacher education systems in regards to their length, structure and content, but it is the historical context and political roots of each country that shape the formation of these differences (Niemi and Lavonen 2020). Within England in particular, educational policy has been rather generic with secondary education being the focus with other settings being neglected (Middleton 2019). This neglect is certainly true for the FE sector, and as this paper has alluded to, ITT for the FE sector within England has certainly been influenced by a lack of cohesion in educational policy and ideals. This has resulted in a sector where the teachers backgrounds, experience and qualifications are just as diverse as the variation in the learners and curricula which they serve (James Relly and Laczik 2021). Hence, it is no surprise that some authors claim that England has lessons to learn from other countries regarding political consensus and a longer term approach in decision making and bigger picture thinking (Chung 2015). That said, there has been some identification of good practice, namely in the belief and dedication of some of those in the FE sector for vocational formation (James Relly and Laczik 2021). Besides, with factors such as the need to recover from the social and economic effects of Covid-19, some authors argue that this may be enough to spur growth and improvement in the FE sector (Orr 2020). For instance, there are now examples of collaboration in the sector being fruitful despite government policy (James Relly and Laczik 2021), not because of it. Therefore, maybe now truly is the pivot point of positive change for ITT in the FE sector.

Whether this change is persistent though is another matter, hope for change is one thing, but there are also factors that must be considered longer-term for success. As a first recommendation for policymakers, there needs to be a greater level of political stability so that the current regimes can have a lasting impact which can actually be measured effectively. Consistent change to the sector and four Secretaries of State for Education within 2022 alone does not embody the consistency required for sustained stability.

The second recommendation is that policymakers and teacher education providers need to consider that the issues that influence the effectiveness of practice in FE can be institutional, learner or teacher based (Smothers *et al.* 2021), and these factors will influence a trainees ITT experience. Furthermore, having a supportive manager and colleagues is beyond the scope of an ITT course, but are significant in moulding prospective teachers into professional practitioners (Orr and Simmons 2010). However, this requires a positive workforce culture to do so effectively. Therefore, FE leadership needs to ensure there are appropriate support mechanisms put in place for trainees to develop their practice. Equally, employers, colleges, and providers must work together and collaborate, not be in competition with one another which has so often been the case (James Relly and Laczik 2021), especially when guided by political ideals.

As a final recommendation, there needs to be a greater emphasis placed on research, but more importantly research that impacts practice. While traditionally neglected, there is now a greater body of research focusing on the English FE sector, and this is slowly permeating its way to include the operation and breadth of teacher training programmes.

However, the body of literature is still not expansive, and there are increasingly calls for evidence of what makes effective teaching practice in FE settings (Smothers *et al.* 2021), and the actual effectiveness of teacher education programmes (Mayer and Oancea 2021). Hence, there should be a greater emphasis on teaching training providers to research the design and implementation of their own programmes, as this should help increase the effectiveness of what they are delivering, but also contribute to the wider knowledge base on ITT in FE. This is certainly something that is warranted, especially as the sector once again goes through a period of transition. However, whether these recent policy developments will ensure a clearer focus for ITT within FE or just more fragmentation is yet to be seen.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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