

# Teacher Training Qualifications For The Lifelong Learning Sector – A Comparison Of Higher Education Institution And Awarding Body Qualifications

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on Initial Teacher Training (ITT) for the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) in England. Based on research with teachers and Teacher Educators at four different Lifelong Learning sites, it explores the relative value of different forms of ITT, offered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and alternative awarding bodies. It shows that, whilst the majority of respondents regard awarding body courses as adequate, most perceive HEI programmes to be superior to other forms of teacher training – both in terms of labour market currency and the quality of learning provided.

Despite the perceived strengths of university-led programmes, we argue that there are serious threats to their future viability. Changes to the ITT qualification structure, the greatly increased cost of university courses and the shift back to voluntarism signalled by recent policy initiatives poses a serious threat to HEI-led ITT for the LLS.

## Key words

Teacher Training; Lifelong Learning; Cert Ed/PGCE; DTLLS; Comparison.

## Introduction

Whilst there is an extensive body of literature on various aspects of post-compulsory ITT, little comparative research exists on HEI and alternative awarding body programmes. This paper seeks to begin to address this deficit by reporting on research into teachers' and Teacher Educators' views on both the labour market currency and the quality of learning associated with ITT programmes offered by HEIs and alternative awarding bodies.

The first section of the paper contextualises the research by providing an overview of the changing terrain upon which teacher training for the LLS is set. This is followed by a summary of the research project, and a section providing an overview of its key findings. These show that, whilst awarding body provision has some strengths, both the teachers and Teacher Educators that took part in our research value the quality and challenge provided by HEI-led programmes - and that, in most circumstances, a university award is regarded as a more prestigious and valuable qualification. The paper concludes by highlighting the significant threat posed to HEI provision by the changing policy environment and financial context within which post-compulsory ITT now takes place.

## Context

Since 2001 it has been compulsory for teachers in the LLS to gain a recognised teaching qualification. However, ITT programmes for post-compulsory education have existed for many decades, and HEIs have been involved with such provision for over 60 years. Initially, four specialist HEIs offered Certificate in Education (Cert Ed), and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programmes but, by the mid-2000s, around 50, mostly 'new' universities, had become involved in teacher training for the LLS (SVUK, 2006). As well as offering courses directly, many HEIs developed extensive networks of partner colleges delivering Cert Ed/PGCE qualifications on a franchise basis. However, alternative forms of post-compulsory ITT have also existed for many years. Offered directly by Further

Education Colleges, City and Guilds (C&G) and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) awards traditionally provided a less academic, but nevertheless useful, introduction to teaching. However, it would be fair to say that HEI-led courses were generally regarded as the 'gold standard', and many of those gaining C&G or similar awards would 'top up' their teaching qualifications by taking a Cert Ed or PGCE later in their career.

For much of its existence, post-compulsory ITT was largely unmediated by the state. However, this situation has changed significantly over the last decade: increasing levels of intervention has meant that teacher training providers are now highly regulated by central government. One important facet of this has been the construction of a competitive marketplace and the introduction of new teaching qualifications in direct competition with those offered by universities. Following the 2006 Further Education White Paper (DfES, 2006), a HE Level 5 qualification - the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (DTLLS) - came into existence. Validated by City and Guilds and other awarding bodies, DTLLS programmes are increasingly being offered by colleges and other providers as an alternative to the Cert Ed and PGCE. However, competition between different forms of provision will not take place on an even playing field. Far-reaching changes to the funding of Higher Education in England have opened up a significant cost differential between university-validated programmes and those offered by alternative awarding bodies. When combined with the proposed (at the time of writing) return to voluntary participation in ITT for teachers in post-compulsory education, the viability of HEIs' continued involvement in teacher training for the LLS appears to be under significant threat.

### **The research project**

Research was carried out at four learning sites in the north of England during late 2011 and early 2012. Two Teacher Educators and six teachers, all of whom were undertaking or had recently completed a teacher training programme, were interviewed at each site. The Teacher Educators were asked to focus on their perceptions of university and awarding body ITT qualifications in relation to three areas: course delivery and assessment; trainee experiences and expectations; and the relative 'market value' of university and awarding body qualifications. The teachers were asked for their views on the relative market value of different ITT qualifications, and why they had enrolled on the particular programme they had undertaken. They were asked to discuss what they perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of their training.

As the LLS is highly diverse we did not attempt to select a representative sample of providers – indeed, given the eclectic nature of the sector, this would be a difficult task whatever the size of the study. However, the four participating organisations were carefully chosen, and findings offer valuable insights into perceptions of the relative value of different ITT qualifications. The four participating organisations are listed below, although we have changed their names in order to preserve anonymity.

- *Cathedral College* - a tertiary college based in an affluent medium-sized city.
- *Pennine College* - a general Further Education (FE) College based in a post-industrial conurbation.
- *Fewbridge Education Centre* – a local authority Learning Centre: one of over 20 such sites run by the Mid-Riding Adult and Community Education Service.
- *Thorne Training Centre* - a Work Based Learning (WBL) provider run by one of England's largest emergency services.

## Findings

### *The teachers*

*Diversity and choice* - Most teachers had some knowledge about different forms of ITT. The exception was Fewbridge Education Centre where no teacher had direct experience of university ITT. Despite the notion of trainees acting as consumers choosing provision according to their tastes and needs, in most cases, they enrolled on particular programmes with less than perfect market knowledge; and in some instances trainees were allowed very little choice at all. At Fewbridge Education Centre, for example, three trainees employed by Mid-Riding local authority were required to enrol on an awarding body qualification at Fewbridge rather than on other provision available nearby.

The particular role in which staff were employed also affected the degree of choice available to them. At Pennine College, Jacqui enrolled on an awarding body qualification because, as a support worker at the time of her enrolment, she was directed to do so by her employer. However, she said that *“if the Cert Ed had been offered, I would have done it”*. Even where teachers were able to exercise a degree of autonomy often their choice of qualification was not based on educational values or informed market intelligence. One teacher at Cathedral College had enrolled on a PGCE simply because the course was offered near her home. However, the views of her colleague, Karla, were quite different: *“the Cert Ed has credibility, and that’s important when you’re making a conscious decision to change career in later life”*.

*Comparative value* - Although most teachers at Fewbridge were generally happy with their course they had little knowledge of alternative qualifications, their reputation, or their relative value – either intrinsically or in terms of career prospects. Nevertheless, certain underpinning assumptions were evident. Cath, for example, saw the Cert Ed/PGCE as *“for people in mainstream education”*. She regarded her own teaching as an ‘add-on’ to her main role as holistic therapist. Sheila, working as a volunteer teacher of numeracy, was aware of the existence of the Cert Ed/PGCE but thought it was offered on a full-time basis only. Sophie had little awareness of alternative provision but thought the Cert Ed was more suitable for teachers working at a ‘higher level’.

The situation was more varied at the other sites but some teachers demonstrated a lack of knowledge about the different qualifications available. At Cathedral College, Dean admitted that he had *“no idea what DTLLS is”*, and he *“didn’t mind”* which route he took as long as he could obtain some sort of teaching qualification. Moreover, some regarded teaching qualifications as generally unimportant, especially in comparison to other credentials. Karen, at Cathedral College, felt her nursing qualifications and experience outweighed the importance of any teaching qualification. At Thorne Training, Judith thought her background in business was more important in giving her credibility as a teacher than the ITT she had recently completed. However, most of the teachers at Thorne Training, Cathedral College and Pennine College had quite clear views about the ‘market value’ of different qualifications:

*“You feel this qualification [Cert Ed] is more recognisable and quite valuable in the workplace”*

(Jacqui, Pennine College)

*“A Cert Ed or a PGCE is known by everyone, even outside education. Nobody outside FE really knows what ...DTLLS are.... I don’t think they [awarding body awards] have the same esteem...knowing that you will graduate from a*

*university helps you to keep going and it makes you feel you are very proud and it was all well worthwhile. The graduation is a statement that you have something worth working for and celebrating...*

(Karla, Cathedral College)

*"The Cert Ed is the industry standard, it carries more kudos. A CTLLS or a DTLLS or whatever you call them wouldn't add any great value to my CV"*

(Bernie, Thorne Training)

*"Different types of organisations value different qualifications, depending on if they are training or mainstream education organisations"*

(Stephan, Thorne Training)

*Comparative learning* - Most of those with experience of awarding body qualifications seemed quite satisfied with their experience, particularly in terms of equipping them for the practical teaching. There was, however, some evidence of a limited conception of teaching and learning on awarding body programmes. Most regarded HEI awards as more 'academic' and concerned with theory as well as classroom practice.

*"The PGCE is far more academic with more theory, whereas the [awarding body] has more practicality and mechanics. The PGCE pushes you that bit further and I think it is probably the higher qualification"*

(Malcolm, Thorne Training)

Some views were more pointed. Malcolm's colleague, Barry, stated that the awarding body programme he had taken had contained "*more portfolio building than actual learning*" and that he was "*formally documenting what I already knew*". Whilst Barry felt his writing skills had improved over the duration of the course, he was also critical of the amount of reflection required: "*reflecting on the reflections of how you reflected. I got a little bogged down with that*".

Many respondents commented on particular dimensions of the Cert Ed/PGCE which they believed enriched their learning. The Subject Specialist Conference, which forms part of the ITT programme offered by a local university, was highlighted by some. Margaret, from Cathedral College, mentioned how the conference provided opportunities to network with colleagues from other organisations. Alexis from Pennine College thought that "*being on campus for two days was wonderful*". Bill from Thorne Training remarked that he had been taught to "*reflect properly*" on the Cert Ed. His colleague, Bernie, believed the PGCE had helped him to develop "*a more questioning mind*". Many believed that an HEI programme had helped to prepare them for higher level study. At Cathedral College, Margaret and Luke both saw the PGCE as providing a stepping stone towards studying for a master's degree. Teachers at Thorne Training and Pennine College also mentioned a desire to undertake higher level study. Similar ambitions were not found at Fewbridge Education Centre.

### **The Teacher Educators**

*Diversity and choice* - All the Teacher Educators that took part in the research possessed either a Cert Ed or a PGCE. All had experience of delivering awarding body courses and, with the exception of the two Teacher Educators at Fewbridge, all had worked on a university-accredited course. Both Teacher Educators at Fewbridge, Sarah and Katrina, saw the Cert Ed/PGCE as more 'academic' and believed there was a tension between this and the 'vocational' nature of those working and studying at Fewbridge. Sarah thought that many of her students:

*“...would not be intellectually equipped to do the Cert Ed...they have the practical ability...but actually transferring that into a university-accepted format is really difficult for them...I’ve got a chap in there who has been a builder for 30 years and he’s now delivering a training programme for 16-year-olds...and I think that kind of person would be completely fazed by a Cert Ed and that’s no disrespect to him, and I could quite easily say that to that person”.*

(Sarah, Fewbridge Learning Centre)

Such views reflected the experiences of Teacher Educators themselves:

*“I wouldn’t see myself delivering the Cert Ed. I don’t know why because I’m probably capable of doing it...But I’ve come through an NVQ assessing route and I gained my qualifications as I’ve gone along so I lend myself better to that type of awarding body qualification...Maybe it’s because I’m familiar with the awarding body requirements and standards and unitised approaches; portfolio building and things like that so maybe that’s just where I’m most comfortable”*

(Katrina, Fewbridge Learning Centre)

There was some evidence of a similar narrative at Thorne Training where the Teacher Educators believed that university-validated programmes were more suitable for certain individuals, especially those teaching ‘higher level’ provision. In contrast, at Cathedral College and Pennine College, the Teacher Educators were in favour of all teachers undertaking an HEI programme rather than an awarding body course. Nigel, a Teacher Educator at Cathedral College, said: *“I tell my students that...an HE qualification is much better to get”* but he was also aware that cost was likely to play an increasing role.

*“We need to win the argument with learners that the Cert Ed and PGCE are better and have more kudos, and therefore worth paying more to achieve them...if people are serious in getting the best qualification and interested in teaching and doing a subject knowledge and access to up-to-date journals and books and so forth than it is the best [Cert Ed/PGCE]”.*

(Nigel, Cathedral College)

However, Nigel’s colleague, Jo, stated that at Cathedral College *“managers are looking towards cutting corners...and they can do this with the [awarding body provision]”*. At Pennine College, the growing disparity in fees between HEI and awarding body programmes was seen as likely to produce certain outcomes:

*“Cert Ed and PGCE have value but the fees for DTLLS are only £850 compared to £3,000 for PGCE...if the cost was the same they would probably say they would go for the university one because it does carry more kudos, I think. But when you actually ask them to put their hands in their pockets then they won’t. And especially if their employers are paying...a manager from a local training agency said to me ‘I can either put three people through a Cert Ed or I can put seven people through City & Guilds’ - so they will put the seven through”*

(Karen, Pennine College)

*Comparative value* - All the Teacher Educators taking part in the research saw HEI-validated ITT as having more market value than other qualifications. Katrina from Fewbridge Education Centre described the Cert Ed as the ‘gold standard’ and, whilst her colleague, Sarah, was less forthright, she also thought that many teachers might regard a university qualification more highly. Both believed that most employers favour CertEd/PGCE qualifications but thought this derived partly from a lack of familiarity with programmes like DTLLS. The Teacher Educators at Thorne Training also believed that generally employers are more familiar with the Cert Ed/PGCE, which Barbara described as

being a 'pinnacle' award. Jo from Cathedral College also described the local university's qualification as the 'gold standard'. Her colleague, Nigel, gave an example of a former colleague who claimed she had recently secured a job because she possessed a Cert Ed. However, he also recognised that, over time, awarding body qualifications might become more recognised by employers. Nigel also provided a sobering comment about employment prospects in the LLS more generally – *"whichever qualification students take there is no guarantee now of getting a job or even some teaching hours"*.

Teacher Educators with experience of delivering HEI programmes expressed concern about losing the support infrastructure offered by their partner university:

*"[W]e wouldn't have access to the kinds of materials that the university can offer. I think in terms of support and the training days and the opportunity to get the moderation and the breadth of the other providers who would be at those meetings I just don't think that the other awarding bodies could offer that in the same way"*.

(Nigel, Cathedral College)

*"[W]e get a lot more support from the university than we do from the other awarding bodies in terms of the regular network meetings, the conferences and the stuff that's on Blackboard and that sort of thing"*.

(Karen, Pennine College)

This contrasted with views on the support provided by awarding bodies:

*"Their [awarding body] externals don't really know what they are doing. Delivery-wise, the awarding body has a long list of topics and you don't have enough time to get through all the work. On the Cert Ed there is time to investigate in more detail and understand theoretical perspectives and how they relate to teaching and learning"*.

(Jo, Cathedral College)

Jo also said there was much more work involved in preparing awarding body courses than university programmes. Whereas the Cert Ed/PGCE is accompanied by administrative support, extensive curriculum documentation, online materials, and liaison tutors to advise and guide partner colleges, Jo has had sole responsibility for designing and running the [awarding body] diploma: *"I did suffer having to write and deliver it, it was all a bit of a travesty"*.

*Comparative learning* - Teacher Educators at Cathedral College and Pennine College raised concerns about the potentially deleterious effects for learners of losing the Cert Ed/PGCE:

*"If we were to move more fully to DTLLS then they [the trainees] would not have access to the kind of materials that the University can offer, the library resources, the online materials. It would be a real pity, a real shame"*.

(Nigel, Cathedral College)

*"Well I think the university one is much better resourced because we have access to Metalib, access to Blackboard; all the module handbooks are there online and ready"*.

(Karen, Pennine College)

All Teacher Educators taking part in the research were able to identify significant differences in the learning experience offered by different forms of ITT. Whilst awarding

body qualifications were viewed as more practical courses, this was not seen as unproblematic:

*“The Cert Ed will have the application of theory to practice, and I don’t think that is the case with some of the other courses which tend to be more practical... and they [the trainees] don’t always have to critically analyse theory in the same way”.*

(Julie, Pennine College)

Barbara, at Thorne Training, thought that an HEI programme “*gives a much broader, more strategic view of education*”. Meanwhile, Nigel at Cathedral College believed that “*there is more understanding on the Cert Ed and the PGCE around **why** as opposed to just doing things, which the awarding body asks for*”.

Nigel also stated that:

*“In my view [the awarding body] tends to overdo the assessment whereas Cert Ed and PGCE have always been more balanced in comparison...yes, it is challenging for some students but it’s more meaningful [assessment on the HEI programme]”.*

(Nigel, Cathedral College)

The Teacher Educators at Fewbridge Education Centre also noted differences between HEI and awarding body programmes – “*there’s more portfolio building and less theory. The [awarding body] qualifications are more like NVQs, more unitised, than being like open-ended developments*” (Sarah, Fewbridge). Jo’s views were particularly pointed:

*“They [Cathedral College] are going to throw out the PGCE and the Cert Ed and force everybody to go down the...DTLLS route because they think it’s easier to deliver, it’s less esoteric and less ivory-towered but it’s all wrong. The students won’t get the same support, they’ll lose out. They just don’t get the big picture with [awarding body] courses. They get told how to do it but not why they’re doing it and, you know, that’s a big difference, a real difference”.*

(Jo, Cathedral College)

## **Conclusion**

Teacher training for the LLS has undergone far-reaching changes since the end of the 1990s, and we are now entering an environment of unprecedented uncertainty (Lucas et al, 2012). For universities, the combination of increased competition, steeply rising fees, and the prospect of a return to voluntarism offers a serious threat to their continued involvement in post-compulsory ITT. Although universities have for many years enjoyed a privileged position in the marketplace, and HEI-led provision is generally well-regarded by teachers and Teacher Educators, its viability appears increasingly precarious. Despite government rhetoric about markets and choice, demand for ITT in the LLS appears to be shaped by employer preference and local circumstances as much as rational consumer choice – and increasingly employer preferences are driven by financial considerations.

The central aim of this research was to ascertain the views of teachers and Teacher Educators about the comparative ‘value’ of different forms of ITT. Although not always well-informed, most respondents have clear views about the relative merits of different forms of provision. Although enrolment was not always shaped by logic or clear reason, it appears that most of those undertaking HEI programmes do so because of the status associated with university credentials, and the labour market advantage conferred by these qualifications. However, we also found that teachers and Teacher Educators believe that HEI-led ITT offers a significantly different learning experience to that provided by

alternative awarding bodies. Whilst in most instances, respondents believed that awarding body courses offer practical and useful skills, the intellectual rigour and criticality of such programmes appears to be more limited. In some instances teachers with experience of awarding body provision believed that such courses accredited or documented existing knowledge and skills, rather than opening up new learning.

Both teachers and Teacher Educators saw HEI-validated courses as offering a challenging experience combining theory and practice, although some believed that certain learners would struggle with the demands of a university course, and that the Cert Ed/PGCE was more suited to teachers focused on 'higher level' work. There was nevertheless evidence that the HEI programmes offered 'additional value' over and above the experience provided by other forms of teacher training. From the teachers' perspective, a belief that an HEI teacher training programme prepared them effectively for more advanced study was commonplace. Teacher Educators with experience of both forms of ITT particularly valued the level of curriculum and administrative support offered by their partner university, and compared this favourably against that provided by awarding bodies.

It seems that the great majority of the teachers and Teacher Educators taking part in our research saw the Cert Ed/PGCE as providing a more 'rounded' training experience than that offered by other programmes. Those who were more equivocal appeared to have limited knowledge or experience of university-validated programmes. Nevertheless, there was a clear sense of inevitable change: the Teacher Educators in particular believed that financial imperatives would increasingly shape the decisions made both by employers and individual teachers. Whatever its merits, the future of university-led ITT for the LLS is, at best, uncertain.

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