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To cite this article: Moira Hulme, Karen Meanwell & Hazel Bryan (2023) Between a rock and a hard place: leading university teacher education in England, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47:10, 1375-1388, DOI: [10.1080/0309877X.2023.2248025](https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2248025)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2248025>



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Published online: 20 Aug 2023.



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Between a rock and a hard place: leading university teacher education in England

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ABSTRACT

Processes of market-making and regulation are recalibrating the work of teacher education. While an established body of research has examined changes to the content and control of teacher education in the UK and internationally, the impact of audit-based accountability on the work of academic leaders is neglected. This study explores the career transitions, experiences and commitments of leaders in professional education at a time of jurisdictional challenge. Drawing on interviews with Heads of Department of 10 large-scale university providers of pre-service teacher education in England, the analysis addresses the impact of multiple accountabilities on professional agency, identity and efficacy. The study finds participants' need to demonstrate compliance with policy directives in a highly volatile operating context diminishes possibilities for critically reflexive leadership practice and policy activism.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 August 2022
Accepted 2 August 2023



KEYWORDS

Leadership; management; regulation; teacher education; inspection; marketisation

Introduction

Higher education in the UK has been subject to far-reaching change as an outcome of market making and the metrification of 'quality' (Komljenovic and Robertson 2016; Naidoo and Williams 2015; Wilsdon 2015). The neo-liberal reform of universities, combined with New Public Management as a form of governance, has re-made academic subjectivities (Ball 2012; Thiel 2022). Academics engage in ongoing identity work influenced by managerial and performative discourses. Academic work is rendered calculable and audited through a range of accounting practices that include time allocation surveys, programme recruitment and conferment targets, teaching evaluations, income generation, and assessments of research quality and impact that feed into global university rankings. External regulation of quality in England has increased, notably from the Competition and Markets Authority and the Office for Students. Deem and Baird (2020, 218) note, 'metrics are agenda setting tools' that leave UK academics with much less influence on where and how to direct their time in a fiercely competitive market.

While the impact of the above processes is felt across the sector, local responses are contingent on university type, organisational structure and culture, market position, department history, size, status and financial standing. University Departments of Teacher Education have long occupied an uneasy place in the university ecology (Furlong, 2013) and these are increasingly uncertain times for the work of initial teacher education (ITE) in universities in Europe (Madalińska-Michalak, O'Doherty,

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and Flores 2018), Australia (Seddon, Kostogriz, and Barbousas 2021; Mayer 2021), New Zealand, Canada and the United States (Brooks 2021).

This article addresses how leaders of university departments of teacher education in England are positioned and position themselves, in a changing political, institutional and professional environment. The article is structured in six sections. First, the policy and professional context pertaining to teacher education as an area of academic work and professional practice are outlined. Second, the conceptual tools of hybridity, relationality and 'ecological agency' (Biesta and Tedder 2006) that guide this exploration of leadership in ITE are introduced. The third section specifies the research questions and methodological approach. The Findings are followed by a Discussion of how 'market contractualism' (Rawolle, Rowlands, and Blackmore 2017) risks eroding relational forms of accountability in the academy. The article concludes with implications for leadership in teacher education as a professional practice and research field in universities in England.

Policy and professional context

In the last decade, England has been subject to processes of market making resulting in the rapid diversification of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers and pathways (Sorenson 2019). Formerly the preserve of higher education institutions, a series of reforms has opened up the provision of teacher education to new actors and alliances (i.e. market competition). The introduction of School Direct from 2011, and more recently, a national network of Teaching School hubs and National Institute of Teaching (<https://niot.org.uk/>) mark a decisive shift towards a diversified and fragmented school-led system. In the new political economy of teacher education, programmes are highly regulated by national agencies that set the 'rules of the game' through 'market shaping', 'market steering' and 'market stewardship' (Needham et al. 2018; Carey et al. 2020).

In 2021/22, teacher training in England comprised 165 School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITTs) providers and 69 higher education institutions (HEIs); 55% of new postgraduate entrants trained via school-led routes, and the remaining via higher education programmes (Department for Education, 2021). University programmes for the professional preparation of teachers (in terms of student places) are largely located in post-1992 HEIs in England. Following the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Market Review (UCET 2021) 68 providers did not pursue or were not granted re-accreditation (25% reduction). Volatility across the sector, combined with changes to the staffing base resulting from changes to the allocations methodology for student places, has exacerbated an increasingly casualised staffing base (McNamara, Murray, and Phillips 2017).

The impact of policy on the teacher education workforce is under-researched. Leadership focused research in professional education has only recently emerged in social work (Zodikoff and Pardasani 2020), medical education (Christner, Smith, and Appelbaum 2020), nursing (Darbyshire et al. 2020), and allied health professions (Gibbs and Griffiths 2020). In Education, accounts are limited to the retrospective reflections of former or retiring Deans (Clift et al. 2015). In contrast, this study focuses on the work of the Head of Department (HoD) as they navigate significant jurisdictional challenge.

HoDs are more likely to have made mid-career transitions into higher education from the schools' workforce. A rotation of middle leadership roles is more common in research-focused HEIs (Creton and Heard-Laureote 2019). In new universities, appointment to HoD is more likely to be a permanent post than a transient 'unwanted interruption' to a research career (Henkel 2002, 36). HoDs in schools of professional education may not consider 'administrative service as a brief detour from their faculty career' (Sayler et al. 2019, 1127) where success is measured through grant capture and citation. Where contemporaries in social sciences and the humanities may insist a HoD sojourn is 'a phase' and not 'a future' (Preston and Price 2012, 409), middle leaders in professional education typically have a longer tenure and are reliant on other sources of 'academic career capital' (Floyd and Dimmock 2011, 390) to maintain a precarious hold within the academy. The staffing base of teacher education is characterised by mid-career 'pracademic' transitions (Dickinson, Fowler, and Griffiths

2022), supplemented by a large number of associate tutors/teaching fellows appointed on fixed-term and/or part-time teaching-only contracts.

Conceptual framework

This study approaches teacher educators as ‘hybrid educators’ (Clark et al. 2005) and university Heads of Departments (HoDs) of Teacher Education as hybrid leaders. HoDs face the teaching profession and academia (as ‘hybrid educators’) and are positioned as ‘manager-academics’ in hierarchical-line management relations. Middle leaders in higher education are key brokers who influence the flow of information between academic faculty, professional services and senior university managers. As Branson, Franken and Penney (2016, 129) note, middle leaders are ‘challenged to work up, down and across structures and networks’. HoDs in areas of professional education occupy a liminal space. Not quite fitting in as full members of *both academic and practice communities*, they are ‘and/both and distinct’ (Hollweck, Netolicky, and Campbell 2022, 6).

We approach academic identity as multiply constituted and fluid, influenced by interplay between the individual, discipline, and institution (Malcolm and Zukas 2009). We offer a situated, relational and dynamic conceptualisation of middle leadership-as-practice. In taking this stance, we move away from leader-centric models that focus on the attributes of individual leaders and binary oppositions between ‘academic managers’ and ‘managed academics’ (Winter 2009, 121) that ellipse agency. In contrast, we emphasise the temporal, cultural and institutional features that constrain and permit what is possible within specific contexts (Evers and Lakomski 2022). In attending closely to the policy and professional context, we adopt an ecological approach to agency, i.e. an approach that ‘encompasses actors-in-transaction-with-context’ (Biesta and Tedder 2006, 18). We draw on Priestley et al’s (2012). Interpretation of agency as ‘space for manoeuvre’, i.e. ‘personal capacity to act, combined with the contingencies of the environment within which such action occurs’ (p.196).

In exploring leader agency, we acknowledge that academic subjectivities are constituted in institutional spaces. Moreover, the intensification of academic work within a pervasive audit culture influences the formation of ethical selfhood (Clarke and Knights 2015). Approaching leadership as a situated practice helps to explore the everyday ways in which managerial accountability and professional responsibility are connected. Hybrid leadership acknowledges capacity for different responses to the demands of new universities and tensions between academic leadership and professional values (Noordegraaf 2015; Shams 2019). For example, Teelken (2015, 310), articulates modes of engagement that range from symbolic compliance to professional pragmatism, to formal instrumentality, and rational resignation. Brew et al. (2018, 2298) identify varied goals including survival, self-advancement and social change. We acknowledge that individuals ‘move across positional boundaries’ (Larsen and Mockler 2021, 8) in modes of agency that are more or less strongly achieved at different junctures and career stages. We draw on Gronn’s (2011) attention to ‘configurations of leadership’ to examine the dynamics of how leading is accomplished in practice. We thus combine a processual approach to leadership-as-practice with theories of enactment that are not naïve to educational politics and power differences (Courtney et al. 2021). We emphasise contingency and relationality in the ongoing process of becoming a leader of ITE in a changing academic environment.

Research aim, questions and methods

This exploratory study addresses the experiences, practices and commitments of a sample of university middle managers leading departments of teacher education in England. The qualitative design reflects a relational and processual approach to leadership-as-practice. The research addresses the following questions:

- How are transitions in academic leadership experienced in the field of teacher education?

- How do university leaders of teacher education negotiate internal-external responsibilities and accountabilities? (i.e. work up, down and across)
- What are the relational and ethical dimensions of leading university departments of teacher education?

The research was conducted in two stages. First, a scoping review was undertaken of university providers of initial teacher education in England. This review drew on publicly available data to establish Department-level information: Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Census data 2019/20 (Department for Education, 2019) and subject rankings for Education (Unit of Assessment 23) awarded in the UK's 2014 Research Excellence Framework (<https://www.ref.ac.uk/2014/>). The ITT census covers first-year initial teacher trainees in England on both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Provider profiles were supplemented by a review of departmental webpages.

On completion of the scoping review, potential participants were identified using the following inclusion criteria: experience of being a Head of Department/Director of Teacher Education at universities in England that have a large ITE intake (over 300 places per annum) *and* returned an Education submission to the UK research assessment exercise, REF 2014. Thirty-four HEIs were identified as the largest providers of ITE (measured in terms of over 300 Core HEI and School Direct fee-funded places). Of these 34, three did not make a return for Education to REF 2014 leaving a pool of 31 HEIs with a significant commitment to ITE *and* a research profile (of varying scale and quality). The webpages of these HEIs were screened to review the organisational structure (for designated roles) and staff profiles (for current roles and responsibilities). Senior managers with Faculty-wide roles were excluded, e.g. Deans/Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellors managing more than one area of Education. After initial approaches to confirm current leadership roles, individuals matching the criteria at 31 HEIs were invited to participate by email.

Eleven academics at 10 large-scale HEI providers of ITE consented to participate, four males and seven females. This purposive but self-selecting sample includes a range of settings and experiences. By institutional type, the sample includes three research-intensive Russell Group universities, three post-1992 modern universities (former polytechnics), and four second-wave modern universities (degree powers conferred after 2000). By region, the sample includes universities located in the Southeast, London, Northwest, West Midlands, Yorkshire and Humber. Length of tenure as a senior leader varied. Four participants had less than 3 years experience as Head of Department; three had between 3 and 5 years; and four had over 5 years.

Primary data gathering involved in-depth semi-structured interviews of 60 minutes duration, with up to three follow-up emails. One-to-one interviews were conducted via telephone or online video/audio call between February and June 2021. The development of the interview topic guide was informed by the higher education leadership literature, personal reflection from senior academics not included in the sample (e.g. calendar review, meeting agenda and committee membership), and a brief review of the terms of reference/role description contained in publicly available HoD advertisements during spring 2021. Missing or supplemental information was garnered pre-, during or post-interview, e.g. student places on courses of initial teacher education, number of academic staff and contractual basis (full-time, part-time, fixed-term), number of staff employed as teacher educators who were likely to be returned to REF2021. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis entailed a hybrid approach combining deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Nowell et al. 2017) supported by NVivo. The analysis involved the application of a priori codes drawn from the research literature and interview summaries, using the sensitising concepts of professional agency, hybridity and transition. This was supplemented by inductive coding to explore unanticipated insights in specific instances.

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018) and approved by the Faculty of Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee (Manchester Metropolitan University, approval number 4706). Individual and institutional contextual data is not provided to minimise the risks of re-identification or 'deductive disclosure' among a small sample (Tolich 2004). Direct quotations are identified by a numerical code (in parentheses) to protect participant confidentiality.

Results

The results are organised in three sections. First, career transitions in teacher education leadership are considered, including the range of activities undertaken, preparedness, support and future career plans. Second, attention is afforded to how leaders navigate the shifting terrain of teacher education within universities, specifically the interplay of institutional and sectoral demands. Third, scrutiny is given to the impact of such multiple accountabilities on the relational and ethical dimensions of leading.

Moving in and moving on from teacher education

Five interviewees were encouraged by senior colleagues to make an internal application for the HoD post – including 'some quite serious arm twisting' (1) – following one or more unsuccessful national recruitment campaigns. Two did not have Programme Leader experience, and two had less than 18 months experience of working in higher education. Promotion on entering the academy from the schools' workforce was often swift. It was not uncommon for interviewees to take a leadership role in a context that was 'very unsettled' (9), characterised by 'a lot of turmoil' (7) with high turnover in leadership positions, including successive acting and temporary positions. Several recalled 'considerable doubt' and 'anxiety' about their capacity to do the job (4), reflecting that 'I wasn't prepared. It's a far more onerous and difficult job than I'd anticipated' (6). Uptake of training or mentor support was negligible. Generic leadership courses were perceived to have limited relevance for professional programmes and HoDs reported little capacity to prioritise their own professional development.

Reflecting on their first year in post, key challenges included the volume, pace and 'weight' (4) of decision making. Staffing issues were expressed as, 'staff needing support, staff having problems or causing problems' (11). Student issues included professional attributes not being shown at school, unsatisfactory progress, safeguarding/welfare, student complaints, and liaising with student case management, placement and support services. Liaison with Finance around recruitment to programmes such as Teach First and School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) was noted as demanding and complex. Leaders' time was concentrated on working with Human Resources to negotiate short-term or associate lecturer contracts to fill staffing gaps, serving the Faculty Executive Group's strategic and operational priorities, e.g. 'reporting on finance or workforce development, hitting targets on the National Student Survey or student recruitment' (6), and proactively preparing for scrutiny by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Being 'Ofsted compliant and Ofsted ready' was depicted as a key priority and imminent threat: 'a sword of Damocles hanging over us' (8). HEIs are given three working days' notice before an inspection. Teaching, postgraduate supervision and research were not identified as core areas to which time was committed in a typical working week.

The complexity, size and scope of the role, and the 'volume' and 'urgency' of tasks was regarded as daunting (7), 'too much for one individual' (6). Workload was described at times as 'brutal' (2) and 'not sustainable' (7, 8). Heads contended with successive waves of complex demands that could not be resolved within conventional office hours and therefore demanded a 'huge number of hours at the weekend' (7) and 'constant reprioritizing' (9). In an increasingly diverse and fragmented market for teacher education services, the 'breadth of provision makes you feel like you're spinning hundreds of plates all the time' (10) while remaining ever vigilant to risks and liabilities.

The difference in this role is the intensity of the decisions that you're making; the density and the weight of responsibility. You're very conscious of the ramifications of your actions on a day-to-day basis, for your immediate colleagues, down to school partners, other stakeholders, students, pupils and then to parents. The weight, density and consciousness of that is considerable. (4)

Irrespective of university type, flatter organisational structures were evident with the removal of Principal Lecturer (or equivalent) grades. For example, a Department with over 80 full-time staff offering 20 subject specialisms moved from nine senior staff to two within 5 years by not replacing staff retiring, taking voluntary severance or leaving for new posts. Flatter structures with limited promoted posts mean fewer strategic matters can be devolved and more operational/ management demands are made of less senior staff servicing a suite of professional programmes across a shifting partnership network. The volume and configuration of placements is re-brokered on an annual basis and subject to local deliberation. Quasi-contractual Memoranda of Agreement are made and re-made between HEIs and schools/Multi-Academy Trusts as parties enter and leave formal yet fluid partnerships.

Most of the HoDs did not intend to remain in a leadership role. Three of the eleven posts (all research-intensive HEIs) were rotated after a four- or five-year contract, however each expected university senior managers to seek to extend their tenure. One elected to take early retirement rather than face pressure to continue. Difficulties in building or sustaining a research trajectory make moving to an alternative research-track difficult. Of the eight HoDs appointed to permanent/open-ended middle leadership posts, five intended to leave their current role within two years. Increased state regulation was cited as a 'tipping point' (3), specifically the prescribed content of the teacher education curriculum (through the ITT core content and Early Career framework). Two HoDs were open to leaving higher education if they could secure a Trust school improvement role. Others considered moving to a partnership or fractional teaching role. Two HoDs insisted that any future position could not have the 'pressure' of Ofsted inspection.

Moving across academic and practice fields: navigating multiple accountabilities

Many of the tensions, conflicts and compromises identified by leaders arose from the uneasy position of professional education within the university ecology. An experienced leader observed, 'Initial teacher education is always expensive, it's risky, and not straightforward' (11). Areas of tension between ITE and university systems and processes included *programme authorisation* involving partner schools and external bodies; *quality enhancement*, which involves compliance with external agencies including Ofsted; *student intake targets*, which have implications for the capacity of partner schools to support high-quality placements in specific geographical locations, subject and age phases; *student record systems* that are designed for undergraduate programmes and do not include fields required for professional programmes, e.g. placement progression; *faculty appointments process* for professional education posts, which require practitioner experience and research potential; *recognition and reward structures* that favour faculty with a developing research profile; *workload models* that do not recognise the intensity and segmented nature of the teacher education timetable which makes it difficult to deploy staff flexibly across programmes/modules.

Frustration was expressed at the division between academic and professional services in all but one of the participating HEIs. HoDs reported imperfect knowledge of the requirements of ITE across central university systems. Annual negotiations were required about mundane but important matters such as opening café and refectory spaces for courses with large student intakes starting before and continuing after undergraduate programmes; or extending student support services geared towards campus-based courses. Leaders spoke of 'micro-aggressions' (3) routinely encountered, e.g. the welcome message issued by the Vice Chancellor 3 weeks after ITE programmes have started, estates work (decorating, ground maintenance) continuing on the assumption that buildings were not being used, or room booking for external events taking precedence over teaching.

Partnership activity was universally cited as the most problematic area. The quality of partnership relations sits outside the mainstream metrics to which universities attend most closely, namely the National Student Survey, employability, and research rankings. Continual work building and maintaining high-quality relationships across a fluid network of primary, secondary and special schools is less amenable to commodification, measurement and ranking. Moreover, the HEI (rather than school partner) carries accountability on award-bearing university programmes. HoDs noted that university senior managers mistakenly regarded ITE inspections as comparable in experience and consequence to university quality processes. Poor Ofsted inspection outcomes can lead to reduction or withdrawal of student places and/or removal of accreditation. Moreover, scrutiny extends beyond the control of the university, e.g. which partner schools are selected, or which school mentors are approached. While offering training and support, university providers have little control over which teaching staff are deployed to mentoring roles by schools. External requirements for quality assurance are challenging for universities engaged in large-scale provision which can include up to 1500 schools across a wide geographic spread.

The low level of understanding of the requirements for ITE within the academy was regarded as 'freeing' (10) but risky. One interviewee commented, 'for an area of the university that is so highly regulated externally I have a lot of flexibility about how I do things and how the team responds to things' (1). For others reputed 'autonomy' signalled disregard and affirmed the marginal status of teacher education in the academy: 'it's because nobody else is interested' (3). Teacher education exposed blind spots in university systems and gaps in independent external support. Interviewees noted that academic regulations do not extend to professional issues that ITE Departments address routinely, e.g. 'so when I'm trying to decide what happens to a student who is failing in school, I find that the regulations of the university don't cover it' (3).

The autonomy is there to allow us to bend and flex to the changes that come our way from the Department for Education. The amount of autonomy comes with pleasure and horror in equal measure. I'm firefighting much of the time. (8)

Your ability to be strategic is limited but within those boundaries there's a degree of autonomy created by the fact that we are that oddity the University doesn't quite understand. Because we can't be compared to the norm, there's something slightly freeing about it. (10)

Participants spoke of exposure in a field 'so vulnerable to policy shifts' (2), compounded by communication overload or a sense of exclusion or 'abandonment' (6). One leader observed, 'we've either seen so much change to regulations, or there have been periods where we've been calling out to know what's happening' (1). The pressure of 'having to reinvent things constantly is a burden' (11). Preparation for the ITT Market Review stimulated further rounds of financial modelling and scenario planning to assess viability, and reviews of staffing profiles and contract types to assess capacity. Accounts were suffused with fear of being judged non-compliant: 'people are running scared' (8). Compliance monitoring extends from ensuring the initial application process complies with the provisions of the Equality Act 2010, through to mandatory Disclosure and Barring screening, occupational health checks (fitness to teach), coverage of the core content of the ITE curriculum, through to records of the number of days in school, the age range and curriculum during school experience. One leader described the position of the ITE leader in relation to the university and schools as being caught between 'two fortresses, both full of complexity' (2). Ofsted don't have 'a full understanding' of HEIs and find them 'a little bit bewildering' (4). Equally, university central services frequently appear to find the requirements of partnership maintenance 'foreign' (4).

Relational and ethical dimensions of leading teacher education

Leading institutional provision in a field that is overregulated, yet little understood, generates relational and ethical challenges. Powerful influences towards compliance are a consistent feature

of leaders' work. HoDs find themselves having to justify actions without a sound rationale: 'You are in a position of say, look, we've just got to do it. And I don't know why we've got to do that now either. But we just have to, because it's regulations' (1). Leaders contended with multiple and sometimes competing demands from Ofsted, the Department for Education, the needs of their staff team and school partners, and the constraints of an institutional workload model ill-attuned to the demands of professional education. Justifying mandated action at department level was made harder by scepticism about the authenticity of national consultations and the politicisation of ITE: 'when you look at all of the consultations, it is the same few faces sitting at that table' (10).

With limited time, space and support for strategic leadership, the HoD is vulnerable to being 'buffeted by the wind' (10). HoDs were encouraged to participate in new initiatives for short-term income generation and market positioning. However, new ventures increased demand on over-stretched resources, e.g. participation in the Teaching Apprenticeship Programmes or pilot of the Early Career Framework.

We have often been involved in projects not because we think it's the right thing to do, or a great initiative to be involved in. But there's a feeling that you need to be seen to engage in order to secure your place in the market (10)

Incoming HoDs felt heightened responsibility in a context where they commanded insufficient control over the direction and pace of change. Low self-efficacy generated frustration and, for some, a sense of failure.

The Vice Chancellor brings Heads together on a very regular basis and informs us that we are the people who can make a difference and change the institution. I always have to start by talking about the constraints that we have, why I can't deliver all of those things. (6)

To maintain levels of provision, HoDs needed to draw more heavily on cultures of voluntarism within the teacher educator workforce, while continuing to resist top-down pressure to increase recruitment beyond that which is sustainable. For example, inviting lecturers to take temporary management roles with no additional remuneration. These are not promoted posts, but flexible roles presented as attractive for staff aspiring to leadership positions in the future. HoDs sought to distribute management responsibilities among colleagues, while 'trying to not leave them feeling isolated or feeling that they're having to take responsibility for decisions that are bigger than they are' (10). HoDs endeavoured to 'shield' programme leaders from an excessive workload (1), while 'asking all staff to do more' (6) than academics employed in areas with less volatile intake and support arrangements.

The centralisation of support services made it more difficult to make a 'business case' for quality assurance posts needed on highly regulated professional programmes. Being different challenges cultural norms, university structures and processes. Courage is needed to subvert institutional process to address local needs: 'there is a very distinct hierarchy in the university ... it wouldn't be protocol; it wouldn't be appropriate unless you were very brave to jump through that hierarchy' (9). Others reported 'a lot of push-back from professional service leaders' (5) when requesting bespoke posts. Concern was expressed about the 'blurring of boundaries' between administrative staff and partnership directors; tensions were described as 'turf responsibilities' that needed 'ironing out' (4).

Knowledge of the local school networks is so vital, and you have to fight to protect that understanding. A university finance officer doesn't see how important it is to service those links with schools. (11)

My number one priority is to ensure that teacher education is understood and represented at the Executive table of the university. It's a difficult struggle and something I find myself constantly having to do. (6)

Compliance requirements and the immediacy and intensity of day-to-day decision-making disrupted other commitments. The erosion of professional discretion, creativity and scope for longer-term planning was noted as 'disheartening' (8). Participants regretted the curtailment of values-driven activity including collaborative curriculum-making (focused on sustainability, equality and diversity),

pedagogic research and curriculum inquiry, and civic engagement for the public good. For example, it was a struggle to make time to work with external agencies to support the 'civic thrust of the university, supporting what's happening in the region' (5). Another HoD spoke of insufficient time to 'remind staff about what we said our values are and helping them to prioritise' (9).

The immediate demands of managing provision necessitated compromise. HoDs engaged in uncomfortable trade-offs between individual career progression, programme development and high-quality teaching. For example, agreeing 'very forgiving targets' (1) for research outputs and adjusting workloads to support marketing, assessment and partnership development. Three HEIs used teaching-only contracts (all research-intensive universities) and others deployed staff in ways that were *de facto* teaching only. Alternatively, back-filling teaching and school visits with teaching-only associate lecturers to create space for research activity risked creating 'a divided faculty' that may damage student experience and strain partnership relations (11). Where prospects for internal recognition and external grant capture were low, aspiring researchers were left to 'publish as a hobby' (11) or turned from the field.

A culture has developed where members of staff who see themselves as research active quickly realize that in terms of self-interest, they are better not to do the kinds of research that would be beneficial for programme development. (6)

HoDs reported that close-to-practice research in teacher education lacked visibility and value yet felt ill-equipped to counter 'academic snobbery' (4) and a perception of teacher educators as 'second class citizens' (7). Most participants did not come from research backgrounds themselves, creating a perceived credibility gap and weakening their capacity to act as effective advocates of change. After several years within the academy, one HoD noted, 'I still feel like a practitioner, a foreigner and an imposter' (10). Another recalled how a colleague awarded a chair for teaching and learning at a Russell Group university is referred to as an 'industrial professor' by peers beyond Education (2).

Amongst teacher educators in universities there's a perpetual state of anxiety, a perpetual sense of failure ... If you're not producing world leading publications, then you're of no value to a university community. (3)

A lot of my colleagues do close to practice work that has informed programme development, but wouldn't come close to being returned in the REF. They're not doing nothing. It's just the kind of work they do doesn't fit. They're not research inactive, it's just that close to practice research isn't included in the returns. (7)

Although leaders were mindful of the need to strengthen their institutional REF2021 submission to Unit 23 Education, only two HEIs reported progress in the number of staff returned whose core work was ITE. One HEI had increased the volume of research active staff in ITE (from zero) rather than relying exclusively on staff outside the department. Most reported no movement, neither growth nor decline. Leaders of 7 of the 10 university departments reported very small numbers of research active staff: under five full-time equivalent (FTE) members of academic staff. For example, a large Unit 23 REF2021 submission of over 40 FTE staff contained only three individuals whose research was in the field of teacher education.

Discussion

This small-scale exploratory study provides deeper insight into the leadership practice and professional agency of middle leaders in uncertain times. We acknowledge a number of limitations. The self-selecting sample is small, which in part reflects the many demands on middle managers' time and the continuing challenges to education arising from the UK Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, potentially relevant influences such as gender on leadership and management in teacher education are excluded. Future research might usefully supplement self-report from HoDs with perspectives from school/multi-academy trust partners, the university executive group and professional services. However, while the sample is modest, it includes 10 of the largest university providers of teacher education in England (in terms of student places) located in HEIs that sustained an ongoing

commitment to educational research (in terms of participation in the 2014 and 2021 UK research assessment) during a period of significant policy activity. While anchored in teacher education in England, the findings have relevance for university-based professional education in other fields and territories.

The working lives described above are characterised by workload intensification, communication overload, and contracting management capacity to deliver ambitious targets in a context of increased inter-local competition. HoDs contended with 'brutal' workloads and extended working hours as they sought to manage a volatile market with contracting resource. Hybrid leaders needed to be persuasive political actors as they constantly made the case for teacher education within HEIs while re-brokering partnerships across a shifting and unstable school network. HoDs sought to act as a buffer between frontline staff and Executive level demands and external accountability regimes, while negotiating short-term resolutions to complex problems with professional services. The busyness of relationship maintenance, the demand for agile responses with imperfect information, and the management of ever-present risk reduced space for critically reflexive leadership practice.

University leaders of teacher education in England occupy an unenviable position due to the centralisation of authority and control over their field, and concomitant loss of jurisdiction and territory to alternative providers. Strategies to 'steer' teacher education 'at a distance' through standardisation, regulation and inspection comprise a new form of 'epistemic governance' (Alasuutari and Qadir 2014, 68). National performance frameworks, contract and contract-like mechanisms for comparative and judgemental purposes are undermining 'relational contractualism' and strengthening 'market contractualism' (Rawolle, Rowlands, and Blackmore 2017, 114). Market contractualism is characterised by a narrowing of obligations between parties, transparent and calculable responsibilities, the mimicking of business relations and management practices, alongside liability for perceived underperformance. By contrast, relational contractualism is not limited to questions of economic value and market efficiency but allows for collaboration based on autonomy, trust and core public values.

The findings of this study do not lend strong support to those seeking to rescue relational accountability in teacher education (Cochran-Smith 2021; Cross, Dunn, and Dotson 2018; Vanassche, Kidd, and Murray 2019; Clarke and Phelan 2017). There is limited evidence of an activist stance exhorted by Henning et al. (2018) in their call for teacher educators to 'minimize, mitigate, and resist unjust policy through curricular, political, and scholarly activism' (p.2). In the United States Cross, Dunn and Dotson (2018) identify a 'cycle' of possibilities across a career span including, 'hopelessness/confusion, safety/danger in silence, individual acquiescence/resistance, collective resistance' (p. 16). Larsen and Mockler (2021) identify four 'positionings' of policy by teacher educators in response to reform in Australia: as a 'tool' or potential instrument for positive change, as ubiquitous 'white noise' in the background, as an unwelcome 'intruder' that posed a challenge to their professional knowledge and expertise, and as a potential 'partner' in future policy formation (p.7). The leaders in this study strongly positioned successive waves of policy in England as an 'intruder' in their professional lives to which, in large part, they felt compelled to 'acquiesce'. This did not vary markedly by permanency of leadership position, length of time in the role or gender, or indeed by university type.

The workaday lives of university middle leaders of teacher education in England now echo the 'hyper-enactment of policy' (Colman 2021, 268) that typifies school leaders' response to inspection. Capturing what it takes to be institutionally 'compliant' has become an end in itself, squeezing space for critical reflection and public deliberation on alternative courses of action. The testimonies of the HoDs reported here do not refute Lovat's (2020) assertion that teacher education has become 'a service industry, serving teacher employment bureaucracies and the government hegemonies behind them, rather than being driven primarily by the social and emotional needs of students and the betterment of society' (p. 344). In this study, HoDs often felt compelled to privilege technocratic, instrumental and pragmatic action over critical, deliberative and ethical dimensions of leading. Being an effective manager of ITE was not always aligned with a self-identity as an ethical

leader, as illustrated in unease around unremunerated work and restricted development opportunities for co-workers, particularly in regard to research. The work of the HoD is largely reduced to 'transactor' of performance policies (Ball, Braun and Maguire 2012, 49).

This is not a judgment of the quality or qualities of individual leaders. The diminution of professional agency by authoritative discourses will tend to produce 'subservient' (compliant) and 'subsistence' (making do, getting by) forms of agency (Bunn, Langer, and Fellows 2022, 4). The many challenges of managing the 'here and now' and the urgency of response required will inhibit futures-oriented thinking and impede capacity building.

Conclusion

This study provides an insight into how hybrid leaders navigate the multiple spaces and places of leading professional education in universities. Pracademic managers are required to make difficult choices between competing versions of effective practice geared towards the achievement of varied ends. University leaders of ITE operate in a climate where it is increasingly difficult to sustain 'ideals of autonomy, scholarship, moral commitment and meaningful work' (Alvesson and Sz kudlarek 2021, 408). Audit-based accountability under the ever-present gaze of external regulator risks further eroding institutional commitments to equity, diversity and social justice in teacher education.

The study raises two inter-related and pressing concerns for teacher education and the future development of the teacher educator workforce. The turbulent transitions recounted have implications for leadership preparation, support and succession planning. Many of the HoDs in this study were persuaded to take the role and few expected to stay. New HoDs felt under-prepared and ill-supported. The selection and development of academic leaders in applied professional fields and the conditions needed to support *strategic*, as well as operational leadership in highly volatile contexts, demand further research and investment. An impending succession crisis in teacher education leadership will do little to help the university sector respond well in times of change.

Relatedly, the lack of movement in the number of teacher educators returned in REF2021 confirms enduring divisions between research and practical knowledge, and the bifurcation of career paths (Wolf and Jenkins 2021; Hulme, Wood, and Shi 2020; Wyse 2020). While there is a clear need for promotion pathways that value teaching, this should not be at the cost of support for teacher educators' engagement in forms of research that are accorded high value. The continued exclusion of teacher educators from values-driven research and critical enquiry damages the credibility and legitimacy of teacher education in the academy and erodes the capacity of the field to contribute to public debate on education futures.

Disclosure statement

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

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