

Education: Past, Present and Future
Developments in Initial Teacher Education in Kuwait

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This paper reports on a collaborative two year project (September 2012 – September 2014) to enhance Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Kuwait. One project team is based at the College of Basic Education in Kuwait (CBE) and the other at the University of Hull in England (UoH). Currently trainee teachers at CBE in Kuwait complete one teaching practice in the final year of their four year degree in comparison to three teaching practices at different points in the undergraduate QTS course at the University of Hull. In partnership, the teams have identified opportunities for changes at CBE to enhance ITE provision in Kuwait, for instance in the undergraduate curriculum, assessment processes and teaching practicum. The project is underpinned by an interpretivist methodology and has used semi-structured interviews with key figures coupled with observations of how trainee teachers are taught by lecturers. The project faces challenges due to the differences in the social and cultural contexts in which the two teacher training courses operate. Interestingly the findings show a strong desire within key players in the Kuwait ITE system for ‘graduate teachers’ rather than ‘graduates’ which should help drive forward the changes required to develop initial teacher education provision effectively. At the end of Phase One of the project (March, 2013), however, support for change is increasing only slowly at a political, institutional and programme level in Kuwait.

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Introduction

This paper gives a reflexive account of our experiences of working on a research project with an international partner. Reflexivity in research is sometimes criticised for being self indulgent (Pillow, 2003), but our aim here is to provide a critical examination of the power relations within the research process. We all know that carrying out research can be ‘messy’, but this is sometimes glossed over when we present our findings. Bagshaw *et al.*, (2007) argue that challenges inherent in all research can be compounded in international research teams where cultural differences are an additional dynamic to be considered. Cicourel (1964) emphasises the importance of explaining the set of circumstances and conditions that favourably or unfavourably influence data collection. Miller & Bell (in Mauthner *et al.*, 2002: 54) point out “the course of a project may only be guessed at initially”. In this sense, our paper does not pretend that the project has been a straightforward process. Instead the aim of this paper is to make sense of our role as a project partner. We do this by firstly discussing the history of the project and secondly conceptualising ourselves in a range of different ‘roles’ – collaborators, consultants and colleagues. Finally, based on an understanding of our role we make recommendations for how partnerships between project teams can be developed.

History of the project

The partnership project officially started in November 2012 and sought to build upon previous work conducted by the CBE Twinning Committee and the UoH in the period 2009-2011 in a project which was funded by a grant from the British Council. According to the original project, the University of Hull was to help CBE develop teacher education in the state of Kuwait. That particular project ran from 2009 - 2011.

ITE within Kuwait is the primary responsibility of two bodies, the University of Kuwait and the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET), although they have recently been joined in this venture by the Gulf University of Science and Technology (GUST). There is close liaison between these organisations with responsibilities towards the Ministry of Education. Following on from the earlier work with CBE the University of Hull and PAAET are now in a contractual partnership

project to extend this work and are seeking comprehensive development of teacher education in the state of Kuwait in general and at CBE in particular.

Under the direction of PAAET the CBE provides a four year undergraduate programme of study for trainee teachers which is subject based and qualifies them to teach in kindergarten, elementary, intermediate or secondary schools. Professional skills play a minor role in the programme which also has elements of general education in addition to their subject specialism. Trainee teachers currently only engage in teaching practicum in the second semester of their final year.

There are separate colleges for boys and girls, although the CBE teaching practicum office provides services to both. The girls' college is significantly larger in terms of numbers with some 10,000 students as compared to 4000 in the boys' college. The two colleges are currently occupying separate campuses in Kuwait City although a new state-of-the-art campus has been built to house both (with common administration buildings), but is yet to be occupied.

In terms of providing a supply of well-qualified and competent teachers there are a number of concerns in regard to the current situation at CBE which this project aims to clarify and present recommendations for change. The key issues identified at the end of the first phase of the project are:

- an overly high demand for student places which PAAET colleges, particularly CBE, are finding difficult to manage;
- significantly fewer graduates than entrants;
- large numbers of students staying on the programme in excess of the four year minimum period;
- selection procedures which do not allow for discerning choice of prospective teachers;
- a lack of alternative study opportunities or intermediate exit points for students who do not qualify or are unlikely to qualify as teachers;
- curriculum imbalances within the programmes which could affect the quality of trained teachers;
- the quality of teaching facilities and student support;
- concerns about assessment procedures and quality assurance processes in general which need review;
- too few opportunities for trainees to engage with professional practice and undertake relevant field experience.

The project plan was jointly developed by both project teams and was to run in four phases. At the time of writing Phase One has been completed in terms of planned activities which have included two visits to Kuwait by the UoH team and one to England by the team from CBE. Four of the five members of the CBE Twinning Committee had also worked on the BC funded project and were thus very familiar with the differences between ITE in the two countries.

Despite this, however, by the end of Phase One there had been only slow progress in terms of planned outcomes and it is considered that the partnership project has not yet generated significant momentum in terms of making changes identified as being appropriate for the process of teacher education in Kuwait. This seeming inertia may be due in part to cultural differences, but could also be as a consequence of political and logistical challenges within the State of Kuwait.

Kuwait: The Context

Kuwait is a very small, but extremely rich country with oil being its major resource. Their major concerns typically relate to internal issues in terms of politics and social factors because of their fiscal wealth results in a society with no visible signs of poverty and a steady growth in employment of both nationals and non-Kuwaitis. In 2012 the national economy supported a population of 3.7 million (of which less than half are nationals) with no requirement for personal income tax or national insurance contributions. It can be argued thus as a consequence of this wealth there was little evidence of social unrest in Kuwait during the aftermaths of the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 which led to widespread disorder in many countries within the region. Despite local grumbling within the political system the state proceeds in much the same way as it has done since they relinquished the status of British Protectorate in 1961 and became a member of OPEC in 1970s. The Crown Prince (Emir) and his family continue to appoint the Prime Minister who selects a government from elected MPs. The state can thus be described as patriarchal and based on Muslim principles.

It is sometimes difficult to see, therefore, evidence of urgency in relation to decision-making, a situation best summed up by the story of the new campus for CBE which has yet to open despite building works and fittings being finished over two years ago. The new facilities are state of the art, will accommodate both the boys and girls

colleges and cost some £350m. The decision to occupy the new campus has now apparently been taken with the intent to move in September, 2013. Reasons for delay in this decision are variously offered by interested parties, but generally focus on two issues: unclear leadership roles within the education system and the pending opening of a new publicly funded university within the country. The Ministries of Education and Higher Education both have policy making responsibilities as do PAAET who are responsible for the post compulsory sector beyond the publicly funded University of Kuwait. Communication and liaison for ITE between CBE, the University of Kuwait and GUST is maintained through a joint committee that meets every two months. Responsibility for ITE thus sits between Ministers, the universities and PAAET and it has not been clear who was to take the final decision to occupy the new campus. Meanwhile there are concerns about insufficient places being available in HE which is free to Kuwaiti nationals and is an entitlement to all who graduate from secondary schools. A decision has thus been made to inaugurate a new public university, Jaber, which will have nine faculties/schools, six of which will be formed from departments currently within CBE. Thus there are at least two reasons for non-occupation of the new campus: an absence of clear decision making structures coupled with the need to provide accommodation for the new university. In this hiatus the CBE continues to operate in ageing, split-site accommodation whilst the new campus remains unoccupied. The non use of this expensive resource does not appear to be a major concern within the country with such large financial resources. It is difficult to imagine a similar scene in publicly funded education systems elsewhere in the world.

The Impact on ITE in Kuwait

The financial resources available to the public education system also impact upon the number of places available to ITE applicants and on the throughput of students. The demographics of teacher supply do not appear to correlate to need and represent a demand driven model of resourcing. The numbers for entry into CBE are supposed to be based on the plans set by the Ministry of Education since CBE graduates are expected to work there. PAAET offers a place to all applicants, however, including those who apply to CBE according to their high school achievement. These numbers, which determine the majors of the students, are then

given to CBE who have responsibility for the administration and pastoral care of these students.

This is a situation seemingly caused by the way in which students in Kuwait are allowed to participate in higher education, with CBE often being allocated students on the basis that there is no other provision available to them. A further consideration is the socio-cultural issue in relation to preferred career routes for women, with Kuwaiti families wishing girls to train as teachers. Students are also paid a monthly attendance allowance and allowed to re-schedule their programme of study. One consequence of this is that there is a very low ratio of graduates in relation to intake, particularly in the girls' college. The girls' college has some 10,000 students, but only some 800 graduates per year; the boys' college has some 4000 students but only 150 graduates per year. Finally, currently all graduates of CBE are guaranteed a teaching job which, whilst enviable from the perspective of those from other nations, is a situation that brings with it potential problems with the supply of suitable numbers of qualified teachers.

There have been many consequences in regard to management of student numbers at CBE with the number of students is overloading the college's capacity. There are too many students for the number of teachers and rooms are limited making timetabling difficult. CBE has tried to extend the teaching day to help with the latter, but students are unwilling to stay later. This has also impacted on placement opportunities for some students who not able to attend schools and kindergartens when they are open as they may have been scheduled to attend classes at the same time.

The desire within the system to effect change appears non urgent, therefore, and is perhaps best summed up by the (perhaps) laconic remark of a CBE official during the press conference called at end of Phase One when he described the project as "cooking on a low heat".

Project recommendations

The overriding concern for the long term enhancement of teacher preparation is with the adoption of a set of teacher standards for Kuwait which will provide a benchmark for CBE in the training and induction of teachers. The outcomes of Phase One of this project also need to be set against the planned opening of the new campus at Jaber University, with consequent changes to the structure of higher education in Kuwait and to the nature of initial and continuing teacher education which may include a radical overhaul of existing procedures. The project teams thus recommend a review of the current provision and in particular to:

- having a clear understanding of the professional attributes, knowledge, skills and understanding that are required in order to be an effective teacher;
- incorporate more in the way of pedagogic knowledge development and the professional understanding of the nature of teaching including theoretical underpinning;
- amend the curriculum for ITE accordingly and review of the relationship between departments, professional studies and the practicum office;
- increase the amount of practicum required and adopt a 'five-stage' model of teaching experience whereby students are gradually introduced to and prepared for whole class responsibility;
- place students on practicum in schools which can help them develop their professional and skills and pedagogical capability;
- re-conceptualise the roles of academic advisors and supervisors from the Ministry of Education and CBE as well as principals and teachers in the practice schools.

The enactment of these proposals is the challenge we now face as the external 'experts', but it places the onus on the UoH team to work with their colleagues in a context where clear and decisive policy making is not always the norm.

Working as equal partners?

Much of the literature on working collaboratively with an international partner focuses on concerns about the symmetry of the relationship (Higgitt *et al.*, 2008). Quite

rightly, concerns about disparities in wealth and education mean that western project teams can be open to charges of paternalism (Higgitt *et al.*, 2008). The literature also points to concerns about inequalities in status (Younglove-Webb *et al.*, 1999). The context of our own project is somewhat different. On the surface the two project teams seem to be equal in terms of the status of all those involved in the project. For example teaching backgrounds, higher research degrees and involvement in teacher training are commonalities across both teams. The equality of status between the two project teams meant that power relations were not at the forefront of concerns at the outset of the project. We were mindful that there were differences in language (Arabic sometimes being spoken and translated into English for the benefit of the UK team) and geographical limitations (although probably as quick as travelling to Swansea!), but accepted these as inherent factors in collaborating with an international partner.

Collaborators?

In essence 'we' (University of Hull team) began the project seeing ourselves as collaborators – two project teams working together to enhance teacher training provision in Kuwait. Thomas *et al.*, (2009:315) argue that there is limited literature exploring 'the dynamics of academic collaborations or reflexively engaged with the complexities of collaborative cross-cultural research.' Any changes to teacher training in Kuwait needed to be embedded in the cultural, political and social practices in which it would operate. A straight-forward adoption of UK practices and policies without any understanding of their meaning and underpinning rationale would have been wholly inappropriate. At the end of Phase One there was consensus amongst both teams of a shared vision for developing provision to ensure students become 'graduate teachers'. There was also agreement as to the developments needed to make this happen, such as the creation of 'Teacher Standards' and lengthier teaching practicum. What also became clear at the end of Phase One was a difference in the interpretation of the time frame in which to achieve these changes. This prompted the UK team to reflexively consider the relationship between the teams.

Consultants?

Our relationship with the Kuwait team could be conceptualised alternatively as the Hull team acting as consultants. Consultants have expertise and can advise others (Clark, 1988). In this instance we have advised on: teaching practicum, teacher standards, a curriculum combining both pedagogy and subject knowledge for trainee teachers and the need for a rigorous interview process with candidates. This could be seen to cast us in the role of the all-knowing expert. Yet this would be an overly simplistic understanding of our status. In part we felt uncomfortable with an 'expert' label as we wanted to engage in the research process along participatory lines. The research literature is awash with reflexive accounts which supersede researcher relationships as the powerful and powerless (Youdell, 2006) with notions that power is only partial, transitory and often shifts throughout the research process, reflecting Foucault's (1977) argument that power is not stable. The same understanding of shifts in power could be applied here between the two project partners – one with 'expertise' and the other with 'financial' weight.

As much as consultants can offer 'expertise', the role of the consultant can also be interpreted as providing a service. As a service provider we are obligated to meet the (agreed) objectives outlined – such as providing opportunities for the CBE team to visit UK schools and taking responsibility for report writing. If we interpret our role as that of a service provider it is perhaps understandable that the division of labour is not necessarily viewed reciprocally. Inevitably this has led to the project not moving forward at the pace originally anticipated. Yet we are relatively powerless in getting the objectives identified to be met. In our advisory capacity we are not able to address the complex political situation by which teacher training in Kuwait is underpinned. At the same time we acknowledge the difficulties our project partners face with regards to navigating this situation and that our advice and expectations need to be mindful of this.

Cooking on a low heat?

As with all research projects there is the potential for mismatches in expectations. The UoH team wishes to maintain a reputation for successful project completion, but are conscious of the cultural differences in interpretations of how and when to make progress. The project has recently been praised for 'cooking on a low heat' by the Ministry of Education in Kuwait. The speed at which this project moves forward is

clearly a delicate issue. Instead it may be helpful to reconceptualise our role as offering a space for thinking and reflection.

Creators of space?

What we have done is facilitate a space for thinking. This is supported by Lefebvre who states 'social space is what permits fresh actions to occur' (1991:73). Through modelling different possibilities of what teacher education could look like has meant that the Kuwaiti project team have reflected on this. Space for thinking, reflecting and developing new ideas and understandings has been key in reaching a shared vision of a 'graduate teacher'.

Colleagues

The Phase One report indicated how not all the expected outcomes had been successfully met and was thus a difficult report to write without possibly causing offence. Not only can we view our relationship with the CBE team as collaborators or consultants, however, they are also our colleagues. As trust and honesty are often the bedrocks of friendship we do not wish to unduly put a strain on the relationship between the two project teams. So how do we build a collaborative and culturally sensitive research model? Based on our experiences of completing Phase One of the project, we make several recommendations to ensure successful project outcomes.

Recommendations

1. **Flexibility in reaching objectives within a given time frame.** Culturally 'cooking on a low heat' is viewed as a positive way in which to conduct a research project. Try to build in lee-way for reaching project outcomes and flag up the possibilities of project extension early – if this is likely to be required.
2. **Think small - rather than big.** Small changes at grass roots level - will provide the evidence and impetus for change. This means accepting slower process with more small scale interventions.

3. **Identify the project drivers.** The impetus for change is influenced by the political, social and cultural contexts. For example, we have had to understand that teacher training in Kuwait does not have the same levels of accountability as the UK – for example there is not an Ofsted equivalency or financial pressures. The UK system is tied up with a government who view education as securing the country's economic future. This is very different from the Kuwaiti context.

4. **Space.** We need to provide spaces which provoke thought and discussion about what are the philosophical and practical purposes of having high quality teachers.

To conclude, our role is perhaps best understood as that of a facilitator to indicate a range of possible options and ideas to allow the key actors in the State of Kuwait to decide how they wish to enhance teacher training. Once they have made these decisions – it will be our role to help them navigate these changes. We argue that in a collaborative research project recognising this messiness in researcher roles is essential to working successfully with an international partner.

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