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## Valuing initial teacher education at Master's level

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The future of Master's-level work in initial teacher education (ITE) in England seems uncertain. Whilst the coalition government has expressed support for Master's-level work, its recent White Paper focuses on teaching skills as the dominant form of professional development. This training discourse is in tension with the view of professional learning advocated by ITE courses that offer Master's credits. Following a survey of the changing perceptions of Master's-level study during a Post Graduate Certificate in Education course by student teachers in four subject groups, this paper highlights how the process of professional learning can have the most impact on how they value studying at a higher level during their early professional development.

**Keywords:** initial teacher education; Master's; professional development; PGCE; student teachers

### Introduction

One of the most significant developments in teacher education in England has been the introduction of Master's-level accreditation for Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2005, 2008) that followed from the Bologna Declaration (1999) and subsequent commitments by past and present governments to support teachers' continuing involvement in Master's-level work (Department for Children Schools and Families 2007, 2008; Gove 2009). The English government's White Paper *The importance of teaching* (Department for Education 2010) is surprisingly silent on the development of Master's-level work, and the government funding for the Master's of Teaching and Learning (MTL) has been withdrawn. The lack of clarity in the value of Master's-level work, and the lack of commitment on behalf of the government, indicates that it is timely to question the value of undertaking Master's-level work so early on in initial teacher education (ITE).

Changes in ITE in England have not happened in isolation; indeed they appear to be part of a global trend (Young 1998; Roth 1999). A significant movement has been to codify teaching activities as skills, together with high-stakes, competency-based assessment of pre-service teachers, described as the training discourse by Moore (2004). These developments have sought to define minimum standards of practice for teachers, yet at the same time have contributed to the deprofessionalisa-

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tion of teachers (Whitty 2008). The proposals for ITE in England, as set out in the government's White Paper, build on this training discourse of teacher education and, as such, ignore the importance of Master's-level qualifications in the internationally recognised teacher education programmes in Scandinavian countries, especially Finland (Simola 2005; Mikkola and Lahde 2006).

In this paper, we explore the proposals set out in the government's White Paper and what they have to say about professional learning, particularly at Master's level, and how this contrasts with the approach currently adopted at our own institution. After reviewing current research on Master's-level study in initial teacher education, we outline our own context and the results of a survey of the changing perceptions of Master's-level study during a PGCE course by student teachers in four subject groups. The survey highlights how the processes of professional learning, particularly emphasising the social and collaborative elements, can have the most impact on how student teachers value studying at a higher level during their early professional development. We argue that this perspective strengthens the argument for Master's-level study as part of teachers' initial education.

### Proposals for initial teacher education in England

The most popular route to becoming a teacher in England is the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), a one-year programme accredited by higher education institutions but which consists of 120 days of supervised school-based practicum. Qualification is determined by student teachers having met a series of Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). In addition, many PGCE programmes (the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers predict 90% [UCET 2006]) offer a range of Master's-level credits which can vary from 30 to 120 credits depending on the institution. Once students have completed their PGCE, they are required to undertake a further Induction year under the supervision of their first appointment (and also assessed by a series of Induction Standards). Other routes to qualification are available, and are proposed for expansion under the White Paper. Post-qualification, teachers are able to complete their Master's study through a range of Master's-level degrees or the government-sponsored MTL.

The 2010 White Paper *The importance of teaching* (Department for Education 2010) proposes significant changes to how initial teacher education in England is funded, assessed and organised. However, one area of teacher education, that of educating teachers at Master's level, remains vague in the White Paper. The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, has confirmed the previous government's resolve that teachers should be highly educated, preferably to Master's level, but the cut of the government-funded MTL suggests that, whilst desirable, Master's-level education for teachers does not have the full support of the current government. To further this debate it is necessary to establish the value of educating pre-qualified teachers to Master's level, and how this contributes to their overall teaching quality.

The coalition government's policies on teacher education represent a shift in policy perspectives as to what makes a good teacher and their role in education. Furlong (2005) noted that under the New Labour government, policy to improve education shifted focus from school-based improvement to individual teacher development. The coalition government's 2010 White Paper *The importance of teaching* (Department for Education 2010) continues this emphasis, highlighting in the title alone the importance of good-quality teachers.

One of the key messages to emerge from the White Paper is the importance of teachers having achieved undergraduate success. The proposals outline an extension of the Teach First scheme, which focuses on placing good graduates from top universities into schools in challenging circumstances after a short period of intensive training, and the withdrawal of pre-service funding to those teachers who have not achieved a minimum award in their undergraduate degree. The focus on good-quality graduates is emphasised in the text:

The evidence from around the world shows us that the most important factor in determining the effectiveness of a school system is the quality of its teachers. The best education systems draw their teachers from the most academically able, and select them carefully to ensure that they are taking only those people who combine the right personal and intellectual qualities. (Department for Education 2010, 19)

Whilst the proposals include the introduction of aptitude tests in order to assess these ‘right personal and intellectual qualities’, the White Paper goes on to stress the importance of academic success:

And while some countries draw their teachers exclusively from the top tier of graduates, only two per cent of graduates obtaining first class honours degrees from Russell Group universities go onto train to become teachers within six months of graduating from university. (Department for Education 2010, 19)

Whilst academic attainment is emphasised, this is only in relation to undergraduate expertise. In the process of teaching itself, teachers’ professional knowledge is not mentioned, with a preference instead for an emphasis on teaching skills. For example, the White Paper proposes a review of the Standards for QTS that will change the emphasis in the Standards to skills rather than knowledge. This is reinforced by the proposed changes to ITE:

Reform initial teacher training so that more training is on the job, and it focuses on key teaching skills. (Department for Education 2010, 20)

The White Paper also outlines how the government understands these skills are developed:

Equally, we do not have a strong enough focus on what is proven to be the most effective practice in teacher education and development. We know that teachers learn best from other professionals and that an ‘open classroom’ culture is vital: observing teaching and being observed, having the opportunity to plan, prepare, reflect and teach with other teachers. Too little teacher training takes place on the job, and too much professional development involves compliance with bureaucratic initiatives rather than working with other teachers to develop effective practice. (Department for Education 2010, 19)

### **Approaches to teacher education**

The focus on subject knowledge expertise, teaching skills and school-based learning from the White Paper outlined above are reminiscent of the training discourse in teacher education. Moore (2004) outlined that this discourse focuses on discrete skills which stem from what Ball (1999) described as a managerialist and anti-intellectualist form of teacher professionalism. When this discourse was at its height of influence in initial teacher education in England (in the late 1990s), one of the

effects was the reduction of teacher education to a list of competences (or skills) which promoted a view of teaching that Moore described as technical, mechanistic and performance related. Whilst highlighting that this discourse did have some positive effects (such as effective monitoring and assessment of teachers, the development of better understanding about areas such as planning and a sharper focus on the purposes of individual lessons), Moore also recognised the drawbacks of such a discourse, specifically on how difficult it is to define and accurately describe teaching skills which in themselves are reliant upon context and circumstances, and also how a focus on skills can result in an emphasis on the practice of individual teachers rather than the understanding of that professional practice. Heilbronn (2010) also noted the subjective nature of these generalised statements, particularly when used in the assessment of professional practice.

This position is counter-balanced by the view of teacher education promoted by the profession itself. Heilbronn and Yandell (2010) used the term ‘professional learning’ to describe the process of becoming a teacher. In the breakdown of what that means they reject the traditional theory/practice divide that often permeates initial teacher education, but argue that learning to teach is a process of ‘formation’. They argue that expert practitioners are characterised by ‘constitutive understandings’ that are borne out of an integrated understanding of propositional and procedural knowledge. To achieve this level of understanding, teachers need to be able to draw upon the craft of practice alongside the nature of practical knowledge and understanding; when combined this makes up what they term ‘constitutive knowledge’. This term is valuable for teacher educators as it reflects the complex and contextual nature of learning to teach. Heilbronn and Yandell argued that working at Master’s level on an ITE course can enable student teachers to achieve this constitutive knowledge, particularly as it emphasises research literacy, rigorous intellectual endeavour and critical reflection.

The proposals in the White Paper do not preclude the kind of intellectual endeavour and critical reflection promoted by Heilbronn and Yandell. However, the government funding for the Master’s of Teaching and Learning, a qualification designed to promote such approaches, has been withdrawn suggesting that the government considers this to be less important than the skills emphasis promoted in the White Paper. The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, has stated his support for professional courses:

The quality of teaching and teachers’ professional development are of the utmost importance and I am committed to developing a strong culture of professional development where more teachers acquire postgraduate qualifications like masters and doctorates. (*Times Educational Supplement*, 10 December 2010, 18)

The tone of the above quotation and that of other statements from the coalition government do not differentiate between higher level degrees obtained in subject specialisms or in the field of education. Similarly there is no distinction made between higher degrees awarded pre-qualification or those awarded during service. The question remains then as to the value of a higher level qualification for a professional teaching workforce.

In Grossman’s (2008) analysis of the attacks on teacher education in the USA, she pinpointed two areas of concern that may have influenced how teacher education is judged. In her analysis she drew upon the work of Abbott (1998) in the way

that professions compete over areas of work, and highlighted that teacher education in the USA has not sufficiently made the case for the difference that it makes in the education of teachers, nor has it been able to lay claim to a sufficiently robust production of academic knowledge for the profession. In the light of her analysis, it would be possible to read the White Paper statement as a rejection of the value of Master's-level work for teachers. Grossman urged teacher educators to defend their contribution and their academic knowledge by clearly stating the impact of the work they do.

### **Master's degrees in education in England**

The development of the MTL under the New Labour government followed the success of various new Master's degrees in teaching developed in university departments of education (see Pickering, Daly, and Pachler 2007). These degrees were mostly aimed at early-career professionals and focused on the development of professional knowledge and understanding in the style articulated by Heilbronn and Yandell (2010). In many institutions they stood alongside more traditional Master's degrees in subject-based education. In addition, they capitalised on an interest in Master's-level accreditation prompted in some part by the introduction of Master's credits as part of many PGCE courses. Whilst this change has affected most PGCE courses in England, there has been relatively little work done on its impact.

Jackson and Eady (2008) conducted a survey to track the progress and effect of PGCE/Master's-level provision in its first year in England (as part of a pilot study), with a view to exploring the perceived enhancement it offered students (and other stakeholders) in their higher education experience (termed 'value-added' in the research). The survey included various large-scale ITE providers, and reported a high degree of positivity in what student teachers thought they would gain from studying at Master's level. However, the survey method (optical mark readers) meant that it was not possible to fully explore what the student teachers thought the value of this level of study would be, or how it might affect their teaching. In addition, when students expressed concern about studying at this level, it was not possible to explore the reasons that underpin such concern.

Creasor's (2009) survey of PGCE students in one institution highlights similar results: an initial positivity towards Master's-level study with a view to it supporting career progression and as an introduction to work at Master's level, but with some concerns about how it would be viewed by the wider education community. What emerges from both of these studies is a lack of clarity as to what the value of Master's-level work is and, in particular, how the theory and practice of studying education at Master's level work together to improve practice.

Burton and Goodman's (2011) research on the MTL raises similar concerns, as it highlights the practical issues encountered when working with teachers in their first year. In addition, they noted the difficulties the MTL faced in trying to achieve success through the ideology of 'personalisation' within a rigid centrally organised structure, and questioned whether this approach is in itself enough to counterbalance the attacks on professionalism in the teaching workforce.

In each of the studies outlined above, there is a lack of clarity as to what the value of working at Master's level is for pre-qualified and early-career teachers. In the research we conducted, our aim was to explore what value the student teachers themselves ascribed to working at Master's level.

### **Master's-level study at the Institute of Education, London**

The Institute of Education (IOE) is a world-renowned centre for education providing a number of routes into teaching. By far the most popular is the Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) with over 1000 student teachers studying for this qualification every year. Since September 2007 our university has, like other universities in England, offered the PGCE at Master's level. This study focuses on the impact of Master's-level teacher education on student attitudes towards their study and how they value Master's-level work as they embark on their teaching career. This paper offers a survey of attitudes over time, charting how perceptions towards completing a Master's degree, after the completion of a PGCE, change over the course of a PGCE. The aim of the research was not to assume that Master's-level work was of value, but to explore students' perceptions of that value as their experience of studying and of engaging in professional practice grew.

The White Paper sets out a vision of teacher education that is, we have argued, grounded in a training discourse with an emphasis on skill development. Our interest in student teachers' views on the value of engagement in Master's-level work is located within our own conception of the relationship between such work and teachers' professional practice: that of the development of constitutive knowledge and understanding (Heilbronn 2010). Our understanding is that this develops through engagement with practice, the development of theoretical perspectives, a growing research literacy, awareness of the significance of context, and an understanding of the norms and practices of a community of practice. These factors, combined through critical reflection, create 'constitutive knowledge'. Master's-level work stands in a close and productive relationship to this conception of professional learning. By charting student teachers' attitudes over time, we are seeking to establish the extent to which students accepted or contested our model of theoretically informed practice.

### ***Methodology***

The impetus for the research came from the first year of offering Master's-level credits on the PGCE course, and a recognition that the take-up of opportunities to complete Master's-level study varied considerably between subjects. Anecdotally, the Geography and English PGCE students appeared significantly more receptive to undertaking Master's-level study than those on the Business & Economics Education (BEE) or Science courses. We wanted to find out more about student teachers' understandings of Master's-level work in relation to teacher education. We thus decided to survey our student teachers during the PGCE year about their attitudes to Master's-level work on the PGCE and about their intention to complete a full Master's degree thereafter. The emphasis on students' attitudes was intended to illuminate whether the value that we perceived Master's-level work was having on their professional learning was also being experienced by the students themselves. In addition, we wanted to discover if working at Master's level during the course of their PGCE changed their perceptions of its value at all. We therefore decided to survey the students about their experiences during the PGCE year.

The cohort of BEE, English, Geography and Science PGCE students were surveyed twice during the year – near the start of their PGCE course (two months into the programme), and in the Spring term as they were moving from their first place-

ment school to their final placement. Questions in both surveys were similar (demographic details were only asked in the first survey), and were designed to elicit students' views on the value of Master's-level study, and their intentions regarding further Master's-level work. Questions included multiple-choice and Likert-scaled questions, each with an opportunity for students to add other factors. The timing of the second survey is significant because the students had already had experience of working at Master's level (and in some courses had already completed one module), therefore the students had developed more of an understanding of the demands of the academic assignments, as well as having experienced working in schools.

At the end of the PGCE course, a selection of volunteers from each subject group were asked to take part in a focus group (led by the relevant subject member of the research team), where they were asked to reflect upon the questions asked in the survey. In addition, those that had volunteered to be contacted later in the research were approached in the subsequent Autumn term to complete a further short electronic survey about why they did or did not sign up to complete the Master's course. Both of these post-PGCE methods were used to elicit student teachers' attitudes at the end of the course. A focus group interview was appropriate at this time to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences during the PGCE and to elaborate richer data as to the reasons for them.

The full data sets were firstly organised into subject cohorts, and then across subjects to identify patterns, similarities and differences between the various subject areas. These patterns in the data were then analysed in a series of team meetings. Commonalities, patterns and anomalies in the data were sought and a series of hypotheses were identified and the data were analysed for evidence for and against those hypotheses. These data were analysed through this iterative approach. The size of the data set made statistical analysis inappropriate; indeed the purpose of the survey was to highlight overall trends rather than statistically valid generalisations. The data are presented here as an overall picture showing the patterns and trends that emerged from this analysis. Where relevant, differences in the different subject groupings are highlighted. Data from the BEE focus group are not directly referenced as the meeting was not recorded.

### The student cohort

We begin by looking at the differences and similarities in the demographic make-up of the students surveyed (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic profile of student teachers surveyed.

	BEE	English	Geography	Science
Number in cohort	56	120	69	98
Number of survey responses	32	102	58	79
% Female	47%	64%	59%	60%
% Male	42%	36%	41%	39%
% under 25	71%	53%	65%	65%
% under 30	80%	81%	89%	91%
% under 40	94%	91%	94%	96%
% with postgraduate qualifications	12%	24%	14%	27%

From Table 1 we can see that there were no substantial differences in the profile of the students in the different cohorts in terms of both the age and gender profile. The only pattern of note is that a higher proportion of the English and Science students already have postgraduate qualifications.

### **Attitudes towards Master's-level study**

The intention of this research was to see how the student teachers valued Master's-level work and if this changed over the period of the PGCE course. Analysis of the survey data showed that there was only a small shift in attitudes in the cohort as a whole over the course of the year (a 2% overall change). However, these figures mask some significant changes in intentions of individual students. The survey highlighted that student teachers predominantly fall into three categories:

- Those that remained constant in their views about Master's-level study (either as being wholly in favour or wholly against).
- Those who expressed a desire to continue Master's-level study but over the course of the year became increasingly concerned about its viability or desirability, particularly during their NQT (Newly Qualified Teacher) year.
- Those for whom the experience of undertaking Master's-level work during the PGCE had had a transformative impact on their conceptualisations of teaching; which affected their decision to continue working at Master's level.

These categories were evident in all subject areas surveyed and, despite some subject differences (described below), there was remarkable commonality in the subject perspectives.

### **Enduring influences**

In each subject area, there was a significant cohort who expressed an intention to complete their Master's study at the start of the course, and for whom this intention continued throughout. In this group, there is some consistency in what they felt that Master's-level work would add to their professional profile, and career prospects. Interestingly, most of the students were not aware of the Master's-level credits offered at the IOE PGCE prior to their starting the course (see Table 2). This is in spite of some subject teams (for example, Geography and Business & Economics) specifically mentioning this at interview. For all the subjects, the two most important decisions for students choosing the IOE to study for the PGCE were the location of the course (in central London) and the reputation of the institution. This is understandable, as the considerable financial constraints of the PGCE often mean that students choose to live with friends and family during the PGCE year. Also many students also indicated that it was the recommendation of family and friends that influenced their choice of institution.

These responses show an awareness of the general reputation of the IOE and that only some student teachers were aware of the Master's nature of the course. The most significant factor, however, was the quality of teacher education. From this it would be reasonable to infer a vocational or professional orientation, a conception of the PGCE course as a reputable route to Qualified Teacher Status. This sense is reinforced by many of the other reasons that the respondents cited: they

Table 2. Reasons for choosing institution.

	BEE			English			Geography			Science		
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I chose the IOE because of its reputation for teacher education	91%	2%	7%	95%	5%	0%	86%	10%	4%	96%	3%	1%
I chose the IOE because of its reputation for research and scholarship	47%	40%	12%	61%	32%	6%	44%	40%	15%	48%	40%	12%
I chose the IOE because of its location	65%	14%	21%	69%	18%	12%	86%	5%	8%	92%	3%	5%
I chose the IOE because of its Master's-level PGCE	39%	33%	28%	52%	28%	19%	42%	34%	29%	32%	35%	32%
I chose the IOE because the PGCE offered 90 Master's-level credits	22%	45%	33%	44%	34%	21%	38%	11%	29%	30%	35%	35%

mentioned that the course had been recommended by teachers and by previous students, as well as by lecturers on their undergraduate courses (indicated in all the subject cohorts surveyed). In each case, it appeared that an overt awareness of the Master's-level nature of the PGCE course had not been a significant factor in their choice of the IOE as a place for them to study their PGCE.

The awareness of the 'market' for new teachers is also reflected in another part of the survey where students were asked about the value of the PGCE course. Again, across all subjects, students' responses indicated a view that having a Master's degree would positively influence their career prospects. Similar findings have been reported by Jackson and Eady (2008). This emphasis on career prospects was also a strong theme in some of the focus group interviews (except for the focus group with English, and English and Drama students). For example, a science student considered:

You see you've got [talking to another student in the focus group] a PhD in physics, I've got a 2:2 in biology and there are lots of more highly qualified biologists around so if I want to become a head of department, which I do, I'll need an MA. (Science PGCE)

Likewise another of the student teachers saw competition for jobs, in a profession in which Master's qualifications were becoming the norm, as the main reason for pursuing a Master's degree.

I also think, if I want to be a head of department, that it would improve my chances as I could be up against other teachers with Master's degrees. (Science PGCE)

This viewpoint was supported by those close to the student teacher:

Friends and family have said that I should definitely go for it. 'You've got to do it. You've got to do it.' I don't know if that is because they don't really know what it entails but they see it as an extra qualification which is really good to have. Especially now, with the competition for jobs is so tough at the moment. Anything that can set you apart from other people is really good. (Geography PGCE)

These responses were indicative of students from all the subject cohorts and illustrate the extent to which the pursuit of an MA qualification can be seen as a requirement for professional advancement, rather than as a means of improving teaching practice. Whilst this was evident in each of the subject areas it was often not the only reason indicated for continuing with Master's-level study.

The second section of the questionnaire invited respondents to consider the potential benefits of Master's-level work. This section was administered twice, in the Autumn term and again in the Spring, when students were more than halfway through the PGCE course. Responses did not change markedly over this time (an overall 2% change). Students remained overwhelmingly convinced that their engagement in Master's-level work would challenge them academically and 'develop their intellectual and scholarly capacity'. It would appear then that many of the students that fell into this category started the PGCE course already with some sense of what Master's-level study would mean for them, though not necessarily with an awareness of any close relationship between such challenges and their practice as beginning teachers.

These responses were common with the students who had decided early on in their PGCE that they would like to continue with completing their Master's, and who did not seem to change their opinion during the course. The next section explores those who decided not to continue with Master's-level study beyond the PGCE.

### **Inhibiting factors**

There were a small number of students who had found the experience of doing work at Master's level had made them more reluctant to continue with Master's-level study (a total of eight students identified through their response to an open-ended question). Some of the concerns were shared by individuals in all subject areas and included academic performance on the PGCE (a factor that was more obvious in Science than the other subjects), adverse comments by teachers in their placement schools about the value of Master's-level study, and concerns about workload during the NQT year and whether it was possible or feasible to combine this with work at Master's level.

Among the reasons given for not continuing, or for being uncertain of the wisdom of further study, two concerns predominated across all subjects: workload and cost. Already burdened with substantial debt, many were reluctant to make the financial commitment to a Master's; aware of how hard teachers work, particularly in their NQT year, many expressed anxieties about whether a full teaching timetable would be compatible with working towards a Master's degree.

Many of the written comments on the questionnaires referred to the need for an appropriate work/life balance and the problem that continuing study possessed for achieving this balance. Many student teachers indicated that the workload that they now realised would be expected of them in their NQT year meant that they could not realistically hope to be both good professional practitioners and diligent students.

Less sure about completing the Master's now, having found out how heavy the workload is on the NQT year and in teaching. (Geography PGCE)

Study is more time consuming than I thought. (BEE PGCE)

This viewpoint was supported by many of their school-based colleagues. In the surveys, PGCE students reported that whilst their course tutors, friends and family were largely supportive of their doing Master's-level work, their school-based colleagues were frequently less supportive of the need for further study. One English student teacher recalled how, on his second PGCE placement, working with colleagues whom he respected, the message he received was quite emphatic:

The teachers I spoke to were very dismissive of it 'you don't need academic stuff, not relevant', that was the kind of attitude. (English PGCE)

This perspective was also echoed in the focus groups, where students described how colleagues had responded to the idea of Master's-level study:

My placement's attitude to the Master's was 'what's the point? You are here to teach, and if you want to be an academic go and do that – but it is not going to make you a better teacher, you should be in the classroom and not with your head stuck in a book.' (Geography PGCE)

Both my placement schools used to ask me how I was getting on and if I was working on an essay they would have a slightly negative view of the university side of things – they felt it was better for us to be in schools – they were ‘it’s all a load of theory, better to be in the classroom’ they didn’t appreciate the link that what I was doing at uni was totally relevant to what I was doing. They thought that it was theory that I needed to get through and then once I was done, I could be in the classroom all the time. (Geography PGCE)

When colleagues were unsupportive, some student teachers felt that this was due to their lack of understanding of what Master’s-level study involved:

My school weren’t negative or positive. They said well, just get through your NQT year and see how you get on. None of the teachers in my department have done one and so they don’t have any knowledge of them. (Geography PGCE)

There was also a concern that rather than Master’s-level study improving teaching practice, it might actually have a negative effect on their teaching:

They might feel it is going to affect our work in the school – that we might see the Master’s as more important than our teaching. (Geography PGCE)

For some students, this was even reflected in an almost total dismissal of the idea of Master’s-level study:

There were always lots of good teachers before, and the government’s idea to make teachers do a Master’s seems daft and that’s what teachers in my second placement school thought as well. (Science PGCE)

And was even an indication of questioning the educational value of engaging with work at Master’s level:

I never wanted to study for an MA and I still don’t, even less so now I’ve done the PGCE. I really found the Master’s-level writing in the assignments hard and, if I can be honest with you, I don’t think they were relevant. Teachers at my schools said there was too much focus now on getting new teachers to do courses and study and not enough on developing the real skills that [new] teachers need in the classroom and I honestly think I agree with them. (Science PGCE)

What is apparent here, and what was apparent in much of our research data, was the broad spectrum of views among student teachers and more experienced school-based colleagues, not merely about Master’s-level work but about teaching and the formation of teachers. For some, teaching was to be seen as theoretically informed practice; for others, it was to be construed as essentially a practical activity that (merely) entailed the acquisition of a set of practical skills. And, as the student teachers realised, this latter, more constrained paradigm remains one that has much currency in the wider world:

Education isn’t seen as very academically challenging. I definitely think that is what other people think – the reactions I got from what I was doing before and telling people what I was going to be doing – you can just tell from the reactions – they are not that impressed. Not like if I was going to be a lawyer. So some would see it as a Master’s in something that isn’t very clever anyway: like higher level colouring in. (Geography PGCE)

Even before I came into teaching I had no idea how much theory there was behind it all. I just thought it was practical – how to teach, but there is so much theory, like for instance with thinking skills and the research behind it. I didn't realise that until I started the course and I think that is part of the problem. People don't realise – my friends ask me 'what do you write essays in?' – 'how do you write essays about teaching?' They don't get all the theory behind teaching. (Geography PGCE)

These trends were even more noticeable in the Science cohort who were generally less positive about Master's-level work than the other subjects. This may be due to the different profile of the Science cohort (see Table 1). Some of the Science students indicated that they had found Master's-level work challenging and this influenced their decision not to continue. Others, those who already had postgraduate qualifications, felt that there was nothing to be gained in pursuing a further postgraduate-level qualification. Similar views, although less pronounced, were observed across the other subject cohorts, however there was only a small shift in the number of students deciding that they did not want to pursue Master's-level study, with most indicating their intention to continue either during their NQT year or just after.

### **Reconceptualisation of Master's-level study**

Another pattern that emerged from the data was that student teachers who started the course either ambivalent about or mildly in favour of continuing their Master's degree, became more convinced of the value of this as they progressed through their PGCE course. In this section, we review the patterns and trends that emerged from this group, and explore some of the factors that appear to have influenced their decision.

Those who had changed their minds pointed to a variety of different influences and factors. Most common was the acknowledgement that they simply had not known much about the possibilities, or had not seriously considered them, when they started the PGCE course. Taken together with the respondents' reasons for choosing to do a PGCE at the Institute, discussed above, what emerges is a perception of the PGCE simply as an end in itself rather than as the beginning of a longer-term involvement in research and scholarship. For those respondents who, in the spring, were becoming more inclined to continue Master's-level study beyond the PGCE, what would seem to have motivated this shift in attitude was something more complicated than a renewal of interest in academic pursuits. One student wrote about 'understanding ... the value of the course for my professional development'; another that they were now 'more inclined to take a Master's to continue professional development and have more space to reflect on practice'; a third confessed that they 'didn't see the point before – now I would appreciate the continued support and academic development'.

Indeed, one of the main characteristics of this group is their changing appreciation of the value of Master's-level study in the development of their understanding of professional practice. In Science it was noted that there had been a substantial shift in attitudes (more than 14%) becoming more convinced that undertaking a Master's would develop their intellectual and scholarly capacity as well as enhancing their career prospects. This pattern was also noted in other subject areas.

For many of the students who became more positive about continuing their studies, undertaking work at Master's level had provided an opportunity for them to develop their understanding of practice:

It makes you a more rounded teacher – who you are as a person will affect the kind of teacher you are going to be and you can't change that. But if you have that Master's and that higher level thinking and being able to apply that thinking to your job then that makes you better and helps you go that one step further. (Geography PGCE)

It appears that the nature of the Master's modules undertaken on their PGCE course had been influential, particularly in how they were linked with the student teachers' developing understanding of classroom practice:

The thing that I have gauged from this year and this course is that the studying we do here isn't independent of what we are doing in the classroom, so it is not like we come into uni and just do uni stuff and it is separate from school stuff – it is really closely interlinked. So the work we are doing here completely ties in with what we are doing in the classroom. So the Master's seems like a seamless transition, something you are going to carry on doing, plus it helps your teaching as well. It is not a pointless thing, where you stay up late at night just writing essays, it does have relevance to what you are doing and will help you. (Geography PGCE)

For these students, and for others like them, there had been a reconceptualisation of the relationship of Master's-level work to practice during the PGCE course:

at the start I had no interest in doing the Master's because I've got one already, and I also couldn't see beyond the PCGE at all, I was just struggling to get through, whereas now I can look to next year and beyond next year and kind of think, oh I might like to be as good a teacher as I can possibly be and the Master's might help me to do that ... because it would be good to have other voices influence the way you're behaving in the classroom and also because I think it would help you personally to think more about what you are doing in the classroom ... (English PGCE)

In this case, the student's interest in continuing Master's-level work is clearly not about the acquisition of a qualification nor is it about academic study for its own sake. Instead there is recognition that there is a causal relationship between doing a Master's (another Master's) and becoming a better teacher – and implicated in this is a developed understanding of what teaching involves: not just doing, but thinking about what one is doing. The student suggests that such thinking is most likely, and most productive, when it is accomplished with 'other voices'. This point is taken up by another student who affirms the importance, for him, of the distance from the classroom afforded by sessions at the Institute.

When you're an NQT you get left alone a little bit more and ... you're like a lone ranger, doing your own thing and with the Master's you have the opportunity to come and talk to other people who are in a similar situation and then look at it from outside, because it's very hard to look at what you're doing yourself when you're doing it because it's going to be very busy ... so it'll be nice to come to the Institute and sit down because you're not the only person ... because when I first started [teaching practice] I thought oh it's just me and then I'd come back to the Institute on a Friday and someone else would say 'Oh I had exactly the same ...' because it can become a bit 'Oh my god it's obviously me ... it's all about me, all about me' ... it's easier to reflect when you're here rather than when you're in school, you're not thinking about

reflecting on the last lesson you're thinking about 'I've got Year 10s in half an hour.'  
(English PGCE)

For this student teacher the attraction of a Master's lies in the continuity it offers with his experiences on the PGCE. Within the demanding environment of school life (Yandell and Turvey 2007) the student teacher and the newly qualified teacher can both sometimes feel isolated from, and in some ways different to, their more experienced colleagues. The university, in contrast, provides a supportive peer group and, simultaneously, a different way of addressing the challenges of one's own teaching.

For all of these students, the shift in attitude towards Master's-level work was a gradual process, a recognition of the value of belonging to a wider community of practice that would contribute to their development as teachers (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Yandell and Turvey 2007). For another participant, on the other hand, there was a definite turning point:

my second school placement has really made me think about it because I haven't felt that I have always got the kind of support and development opportunities I would want there. It has made me quite aware that in a school you might not always get that, and you might not always get the kind that you want, so for me it's quite useful to think that there may be other ways of getting that, to help me develop independently as opposed to taking on the character of the department or my mentor or whatever.  
(English PGCE)

The PGCE has already enabled the student teacher to gain a perspective on school experience wider than that offered by the school-based colleagues with whom she worked. Confronted with the danger that she might simply adopt the teacher identity offered by a single department, she envisages that participation in the wider community of practice constituted in, and through, Master's-level work might be a way of enabling her to develop fully as a teacher.

In addition to some of the negative attitudes towards continuing involvement in a Master's-level programme that emerged from the focus groups, some participants also revealed highly positive attitudes. An example of this can be seen in the case of one trainee who had happened to be placed in two schools where members of the English department were newly qualified teachers enrolled on the Master of Teaching course at the Institute of Education. From them (the names below are pseudonyms), she had gained an insight into the benefits of participation in such a programme of study:

both Tess and Anne that I met, NQTs, they couldn't say enough about how it helped them and how it's kept them grounded, and how it's helped them, instead of just trudging along and kind of getting stuck in everything and getting really discouraged, those are kind of the lights at the end of the tunnel ... Tess said it can be annoying sometimes, but it makes you think ... she just really liked that kind of dialogue she could have with teachers even when she wasn't seeing them. (English PGCE)

Once more, there is that sense of 'different voices' that was identified by the student teacher quoted above. What this participant's experience suggests is the dynamic potential of engagement in Master's-level work – the possibility of a developing community of practice.

## Discussion

The student teachers in our sample were a disparate group whose attitudes to teaching, to the PGCE, and to the issue of continuing their participation in a Master's degree differed markedly. Though there might be some relationship between these attitudes and the students' subject orientations, any such variations did not emerge strongly from our analysis of the data. However, what does stand out, particularly in the views articulated by student teachers in the latter phase of their PGCE, is a rationale for participation in a particular form of professional development. It is not surprising that this rationale has an instrumental aspect: it is envisaged that continuing participation in Master's-level work will contribute to the participants' career success.

The data also show that the theory/practice divide that dominates the discussion in policy and scholarship circles is also endemic at practitioner level. Whilst some of the student teachers surveyed were starting to develop a sense of the 'constitutive knowledge' outlined at the start of this paper, this was certainly not the case for everyone. The data show that for some the PGCE is seen as an opportunity for the development of 'teaching skills', the view supported in the White Paper. The data also show that this is a view that can dominate some of the discussions about academic work that take place in schools. However, there was a clear sense from the student teachers themselves about the value of the work they were undertaking in their own professional development. The challenge for many seemed to be in the articulation of this impact (and this may be fault of the data collection methods). Recognising the complex nature of teachers' professional development and learning would indicate that this is not surprising. However, what does emerge from our data is a recognition of the process of professional learning. The most surprising result was the emphasis on the social dimensions of learning and the emphasis placed on continuity of experience between the PGCE and subsequent study, particularly when this involves dialogic exchanges among peers.

Whilst research conducted with students by their lecturers must always be treated with a degree of caution, as responses may be skewed due to the professional relationship, it is interesting to note that the professional relationships with peers and colleagues emerge as a strong learning mechanism. It would appear that the contribution of working at Master's level has been to enable the students in this research to problematise their professional contexts and experiences; to enable them to become 'critical incidents' (Tripp 1993) from which the students can elicit deeper (or constitutive) understandings.

Studying at higher level such as a Master's degree is often seen as a solitary occupation. However, teaching is a social profession, grounded in relationships between teachers and pupils and between peers. Whilst our articulation of the practices of professional learning emphasises the end result (that of constitutive knowledge grounded in critical reflection and research literacy), it is the process of professional learning that would appear to have been the most influential for our students. This is an aspect of working at Master's level that we underplay on our courses, and yet would seem to be the most transformative for our students.

The parameters of initial teacher education may be outlined in policy documents, but the process of learning to become a teacher is still in the hands of initial teacher education providers. In this paper we have outlined that the proposals in the White Paper reflect a training discourse in teacher education, and that this can be seen in contrast to the approach taken on our course. This is not to suggest that the

development of teaching skills (as emphasised in the White Paper) is not important. Instead our focus is on the processes of understanding teaching and learning which, as our data show, are most effective when the collaborative and social dimensions of professional learning are developed with the skills of critical reflection and research literacy. This combination enables teachers to problematise their learning contexts and develop complex understandings of teaching and learning.

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