

Guide for Busy Teacher Educators: PGCE M level

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Introduction

In 1998 a consultation paper was put out by QAA in an attempt to rationalise the frameworks on which all qualifications were based. The rapid growth of both postgraduate awards and the range of degree subjects now offered by Higher and Further Education institutions had resulted in difficulties in determining the place of awards within a common structure. The National Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) was brought into effect in September 2004 by England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, with a version also available for Scotland to reflect the differences in undergraduate awards here, and these frameworks provide the basis for much of the work done since on Postgraduate awards, including the Postgraduate Certificate in Education.

One of the difficulties of the well recognised award of PGCE was its claim to being 'postgraduate' in nature whilst many of the programmes offered were usually equivalent to the old Level 3 or Honours award. In order to comply with the NQF (HE), institutions were required to review their position and a joint statement put out for use by Universities UK (UUK), the Quality Assurance Association (QAA), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) set out the options available. HEIs were required to assign a title appropriate to the level of study, either:

- Professional Graduate Certificate in Education for those PGCE qualifications which are pitched at Honours level, and align with the FHEQ qualification descriptor at H (honours Level)
- or
- Postgraduate Certificate in Education titles for those PGCE qualifications which are pitched beyond Honours level and align with the FHEQ qualification descriptor at M (masters) level.

These revisions were expected to be in place by the 1st September, 2006, however, the parameters of such courses remain unclear. The FHEQ provides only a framework for outcomes rather than identifying a credit structure and the guidance available in the joint statement merely states: "Such courses may form a progression route within a framework which ultimately leads to a Masters degree." My own correspondence with UCET, TDA, QAA and HEFCE has only resulted in guidance that 60 credit points at M level would seem an appropriate credit rating.

What are the characteristics of effective PGCE M level practice?

There are many different structures used by ITEs to meet the requirements of the PGCE, all of which have both advantages and disadvantages. It is therefore difficult to support one structure but better rather to extrapolate those characteristics which seem to lead to effective PGCE programmes. These can be divided into areas as follows:

Programme design and organisation

- A clear statement of outcomes in terms of the award, for example, a PGCE with or without recommendation for QTS or possibly QTS only. Some institutions offer students the choice either at the beginning of the course or partway through as to which route they wish to follow, others have one exit award only.
- Although separation of the academic award of PGCE and the professional award of QTS is a useful starting point, this can lead to difficulties at validation and providers are advised to ensure that all those involved understand the differences between the requirements for the two outcomes (e.g. registry, external examiners and reviewers, OfSTED). A key element to this is the way in which the two elements interact; for example, what is the difference between a graduate who exits with a PGCE with QTS and one who exits with QTS only?
- Begin with the philosophy of the award. What is it which will characterise the postgraduate nature of your award and how is this best expressed through the learning outcomes of the programme and the programme specification? This may also be driven by the key indicators of your institution, for example, research-led teaching.
- The ways in which the character of the award is expressed within the taught programme is critical and must be made explicit to the students. Having themes for each section of the programme will enable different elements to draw on generic theory and research and clearly demonstrate synthesis between and progression within the institution-based and the school-based elements of the programme. Having a generic teaching and learning programme central to course development will support this.
- Consider coverage of NC subjects, RE and PSHE, bearing in mind that some teaching time may be needed to support the Masters element of the programme. This will reduce the teaching time available and some difficult decisions may need to be taken when considering how this can be achieved.
- Consult widely before deciding on the final structure. School partners are an essential part in the design process as they will need to reflect these changes in school-based training. Past, current and prospective students also bring much to these discussions.
- Establish clear progression routes to Masters awards which will build on the PGCEs and encourage articulation onto these awards. This may result in further programme development.

Teaching

- Study at Masters level requires a level of critical reflection which is not always achievable by the already packed programmes of most PGCEs. Considering how to achieve independence in student learning is a key facet to effective M level PGCEs and non-contact time is a critical element in this.
- For many students, this will be the first time they have been required to think in the highly personal, reflective manner needed for becoming a reflective practitioner and the study skills required for this may be very different to those used in their first degree. Consider the nature of the applicants and how best to support the development of effective study skills, possibly through taught sessions in the programme or optional sessions both prior to commencement of the programme and during the programme in areas such as research in

education, referencing, structuring education assignments, etc. It is worth noting that students who already hold Masters or even doctorate awards sometimes struggle with the very different nature of the PGCE at Masters level and therefore prior qualifications should not be seen as an indicator of success.

- Provision of high-quality, current theoretical literature is essential to the PGCE at M level and this may require some investment in the library resources available. Increased access to key papers can be achieved through on-line journals, library boxes of papers or photocopying key papers for distribution, all of which involve cost.
- The role of professional tutor is key, as is the provision of a forum for students to record their progress throughout the course (e.g. an HE progress file). Time must be given to group or individual tutorials which support the developing independence of the students.
- VLEs can offer valuable opportunities for students and tutors to share and develop ideas and to communicate with each other but they require careful structuring and organisation to gain maximum benefit.

Assessment

- Programmes which are not overburdened by assessment requirements provide the opportunity for both students and tutors to explore specific areas in depth. These could be generic pedagogical issues or they could provide the forum for the development of a subject specialism.
- Consideration must be given to the assessment requirements of each element of the programme, that is, the PGCE and the Standards for QTS. There is a good argument for most of the standards to be assessed through school-based work and the PGCE to be assessed through more formal assignments. However, if there is to be synthesis between the two, then each should draw from and support the other. In other words, students need to be able to relate theory to practice and this should be made explicit within all elements of the programme.
- Ensuring the PGCE conforms to the regulations of the Masters programmes currently offered by your institution will make the transition easier for those students who wish to convert their PGCE to a Masters award. Consider, for example, using the same pass mark, assessment criteria and assignment feedback structures, forms of structure and referencing, presentation, etc. However, specific assignment criteria will enable students and tutors to make generic criteria more accessible and will make explicit elements which may not be easily identifiable. For example, OfSTED will be looking for ways in which the Masters level assignments contribute to progression in the standards for QTS.
- Some tutors may not have experience in marking work at M level and therefore support and training will need to be built into the programme. It may be useful to have a core group of markers for the assignment rather than including all tutors on the programme and to build in regular moderation of marking above and beyond that already structured within the regulations.

Collaborative work with schools

- Consideration must be given to how students can relate their M level study to their work in schools and this must be promoted through school-based work and taught sessions within the institution. Explicit links must be made between theory, research and practice and, as mentioned earlier, having generic themes may prove useful in defining this.

Quality assurance

- Ensure external examiners fully understand the scope and philosophy of the programme to avoid misinterpretations of what you are trying to achieve.
- Ensure that links between the academic and the professional elements of the programme are made explicit with clear attention to the professional elements in all assessed work. This will make it easier for OfSTED to see the relationships established between theory/research and practice.
- Devise evaluations which specifically address the learning outcomes and programme specification as generic institution-wide evaluations may not enable extrapolation of key determinants.

Marketing

- Although it is apparent that some students deliberately choose courses which offer the PGCE at M level, it is also evident that some students deliberately avoid these programmes, electing to study on what they perceive to be 'easier' courses. Marketing of PGCE courses at M level needs to be done carefully, with clear explanations of the benefits not only of doing M level work but also of study at a specific institution. What is it that makes your programme different to that of another institution?
- Market the programme to partner schools and more widely as schools may not be aware of the difference between a professional and a postgraduate qualification. A statement in a reference is a good place to market the programme and 'sell' the students to employers but opportunities should also be sought through websites, partnership meetings, etc.

What are the benefits of PGCE M level to students and teacher educators?

One of the main benefits of PGCE at M level is the opportunity it offers to support the development of high quality practitioners who can not only meet the professional standards for Qualified Teacher Status but who can also think critically about provision for the future. Such an approach enables teacher educators to extend thinking in primary ITE beyond the Professional Standards required for QTS and educate critically reflective teachers who are able to evaluate best approaches to primary pedagogy underpinned by a broad and comprehensive understanding of theory and research in this area. Depending on how the programme is organised, opportunities can be made available for trainees to explore elements of provision in detail or to focus on specific subject areas in preparation for curriculum or strategic leadership roles. This flexibility enables students to take ownership for their own professional development and prepares them for further study and/or professional development.

In addition, the revised professional standards for teachers make explicit the level of critical thinking required for progression within the teaching profession and the TDAs funding of the Postgraduate Professional Development programme and the revised

standards for teachers' CPD provide a clear message that Masters level work is given high status within the Continuing Professional Development of teachers.

As a result, one of the main benefits to HEIs is the opportunity to increase take up of Masters level modules which enable PGCE students to 'top up' their award. However, HEIs may need to review current awards to ensure they are attractive to these graduates. For example, some institutions are offering M level induction modules which can be undertaken during induction year and used to contribute to Masters awards.

How can PGCE M level be incorporated into current practice?

In some cases it may be easy to incorporate M level into a current PGCE but often the need to create space for the M level support/study and for students to gain valuable time in which they can become critically reflective, independent learners requires a complete review.

Masters level work must become integral to all elements of the programme so that it is not seen as 'bolt-on'. This requires a review of each element of a PGCE programme, both taught and school-based, to ensure development in each of the following:

- students' knowledge and understanding of a subject area;
- students' understanding of pedagogical approaches to this subject area;
- students' critical thinking skills in this area; to include reflection on current pedagogical approaches, misconceptions and research and theory.

How can I find out more about PGCE M level?

ESCalate, NaPTEC and UCET have all held recent conferences on this subject and the proceedings of these provide useful references. A good reference point is also the websites of providers currently offering PGCE at M level as programmes vary greatly and a review of these will often enable you to identify elements which you would like to incorporate in your own programme. The following links may also prove useful.

Links

Quality Assurance Agency www.qaa.gov.uk

Draft professional standards for teachers

<http://www.tda.gov.uk/teachers/professionalstandards.aspx>

Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI/default.asp>

Joint statement for use by UUK, SCOP, QAA and UCET

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/PGCEstatement.asp>