

The health, status and future of undergraduate education programmes: a comparison of programme leaders' views on leading and developing the subject within different institutions.

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Background and Rationale

Undergraduate Education courses are a popular choice for higher education students in the UK. In 2019, the website for the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) showed 843 different Education-related course options across 138 providers. Some 33,000 new students enrolled on these courses in the 2017-18 academic year alone (HESA, 2019), significantly more than the numbers enrolling on Law or History courses, for instance.

Despite the apparent popularity of Education as an undergraduate subject area, the courses being offered in this field have myriad different names and offer considerable diversity in terms of aims, content and outcomes. Some courses position themselves as more vocational, seeking to prepare students for roles in teaching or other related areas. Others aim for a more academic identity, tending to draw upon the disciplines and traditions of sociology, philosophy, psychology and history. The balance of 'academic' and 'vocational' content and focus varies across different programmes, no doubt influenced by the individuals involved in their leadership, the universities and colleges where the programmes are located, the student bodies being served, as well as other systemic factors.

Over the years there have been lively debates about Education as an academic field or discipline, about the purposes of university schools of education, and about the role of education(al) research for policy and practice. Despite this ongoing interest and investment in the area though, we know much less about how these issues of subject identity and positioning have influenced undergraduate Education courses as *programmes of study*. We know relatively little about how these courses are conceived, designed and enacted by those responsible for leading them. Given their well-established (and potentially growing) place within the higher education sector, we argue that gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences and attitudes of those leading these courses is timely and of wider value to those working in the area.

This project, therefore, mapped the current field of undergraduate Education-related degrees through engagement with their programme leaders. It aimed to understand the subject's current status, and to contribute meaningfully to its evolution and development within a wider, ever-changing higher education context. Through the contributions of the programme leaders involved in our study, we are able to present a detailed picture of the current UK Education Studies landscape, examining how it is faring within wider contemporary UK higher education and further education contexts, and providing a space to consider how the subject might develop in the future.

The Study

The project featured two phases of data collection fieldwork: phase 1 was an online survey of Education and non-Education undergraduate programme leaders; phase 2 was a series of follow-up interviews with undergraduate Education programme leaders.

Phase 1: online survey of Education and non-Education programme leaders

Two parallel and complementary questionnaire instruments were designed in order to elicit a wide view from the field in relation to the areas of concern outlined above. The first of these surveys was aimed at Education-related programme leaders and the second was aimed at programme leaders of other subjects. They remained 'live' for participants to complete from February to September 2020. Questionnaires were designed to take participants around 15-20 minutes to complete. By the time the surveys closed, we had received 71 usable responses to the Education-related survey and 61 usable responses to the non-Education-related survey. Analysis was undertaken using statistical software. This included comparing the responses of Education and non-Education respondents, as well as looking within the Education sample for comparisons between different institution types.

Phase 2: in-depth interviews with undergraduate education programme leaders in further and higher education settings

Participants of the Education questionnaire were invited to participate in follow-up interviews. From those who shared their details, we selected a subsample of 11 participants from different institutional settings. These included:

- 3 programme leaders from 'Pre 92' and/or 'Russell Group' institutions
- 4 programme leaders from 'Post 92' institutions
- 4 programme leaders of courses based in further education settings

The semi-structured interviews covered similar topics to those found in the online survey phase but crucially allowed course leaders more time and space to provide more in-depth responses. Interviews were conducted online between July and November 2020 and lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed in preparation for thematic analysis.

Findings

Below we address each of the Research Questions in turn, drawing upon both survey and interview data, before offering conclusions and outlining the key implications of our research for the subject association.

1. How is UG Education as a subject affiliated/organised within institutions?

- 70% of our Education PLs in both Post-92 and FE settings said they shared a department/school/faculty with initial teacher education (ITE) programmes. This proportion is c.50% in Pre-92/Russell Group institutions
 - Within FE, some Education programmes shared a department with various Level 3 (pre-UG level) courses or Access to HE courses which did not always offer the most efficient links in the PLs' view.
 - PLs in HE settings tend to feel their course best aligns with the social sciences or humanities subjects, often noting their aspiration to critique education through societal, philosophical or in some cases psychological lenses.
 - Yet PLs of UG courses perceive stronger links between their programme and teacher education courses when there are clear progression routes mapped for students within their institutions.
- PLs perceive their course 'fits' better within their department when they themselves felt part of a 'community of educators' and had relevant support from administrators and colleagues.
 - Feeling positive about their own role and being part of a 'community of academic researchers in the field' also positively correlated with 'fit', as did the size of the full-time permanent course team – with larger teams correlating with a perceived better departmental 'fit'.
- Similar themes emerged from the interviews. There are perceived benefits for undergraduate Education courses if they share a department with ITE programmes (e.g., student recruitment, staffing expertise) but PLs reported feeling rather dominated too, most notably when they are smaller or newer courses.

2. What do Programme Leaders see as the challenges and opportunities in leading their programmes?

- Both surveys pointed to general agreement amongst PLs (of Education and of non-Education degrees) that their programmes are addressing current HE initiatives (derived from priority areas identified by Universities UK and Advance HE).
- Overall, both groups of PLs tended to agree that their programmes are addressing: the need to engage students through partnerships and dialogue; developing opportunities for internationalisation; using technology to maximise the student experience; designing assessments for student success; narrowing demographic gaps in student outcomes.
 - However, whilst both groups agreed to a strong extent that their programmes were ‘embedding employability’, non-Education PLs were more likely to do so. This could reflect the tension expressed by the Education PLs in our research about the relationship between UG Education degrees and teacher education; a concern about developing wider employability opportunities beyond teaching may have slightly dampened the Education PLs agreement in this area.
 - Education PLs working in Pre-92 and Russell Group institutions were considerably less likely to agree that their programme had developed ‘flexible learning opportunities’ (such as part time or work-based programmes) than equivalent PLs in post-92 universities.
 - Those working in FE regarded this as a key area they were addressing – which links to other data we have suggesting FE student cohorts tend to include more mature students with more varied academic backgrounds.
- A central challenge is UG Education programmes’ organisational relationship with teacher education in their institutions:
 - PLs of non-QTS UG Education programmes describe how their programmes are perceived as having lower status compared to QTS-awarding programmes (especially PGCEs) within their departments/institutions.
 - This often manifests in issues around student recruitment, where these courses offer a ‘backstop’ for departments in terms of retaining existing students (e.g., switching them from QTS to the non-QTS UG programme) or recruiting new students (e.g., offering a ‘Widening Participation’ route or potential for larger student numbers generally).
 - Playing such a role within their departments contributes to a pair of key challenges for these programmes:
 - Larger Education UG programmes tend to have a greater number of students per member of staff. This contrasts with non-Education related programmes and supports the view that UG Education programmes are seen as resource-light courses.

- Yet these programmes are more likely to enrol students from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds, including mature students, students with identified learning needs, students with more vocational Level 3 qualifications and those with lower university entry grades. In this context, PLs describe having to provide a high level of student support and ongoing efforts to draw on appropriate institutional resources (e.g., for academic writing; for mental health and wellbeing needs).
- A related key challenge is the PL role itself – its ill-defined parameters, heavy administration workload and middle management position means that those in the role can feel compromised.
 - PLs often describe unending dedication to their students and the programme; this drive and motivation represents an opportunity for institutions and the subject more widely as PLs (and other colleagues, of course) are able to orchestrate programme success and carry forward key initiatives.
 - Yet this happens in the context of managerialist accountability regimes in HE and FE, which PLs identify as a barrier to making meaningful change – often time and energy is expended on gathering metrics or acting on institutional imperatives tied with highly visible external measures of course success (such as the NSS), limiting more strategic programme development which they would prefer to work on.
 - A key related challenge for PLs in leading courses is being in ‘middle management’, with much responsibility but relatively little power. Here, the issue of line management responsibility emerges; though few PLs desired the additional duties of managing colleagues, they identified that not being able to affect department-level staffing allocations or priorities frustrates their efforts in programme management and development.
 - PLs of Education courses in FE in our survey were more likely than those in HE to also have line management responsibility, highlighting an important point of difference in the experiences of those colleagues.
 - An important theme in our findings was the way that PLs came to the role and how it is perceived as part of a career. Just over 50% of the Education PLs in our survey were asked to or directed to take on the role, rather than applying for it more formally (either as an internal or external candidate), compared with 70% of non-education related PLs.
 - Whilst, overall, the PL role tends to be a more informal appointment and perhaps not always part of a planned career route, those on Education programmes describe agreeing to take it on as it represents an opportunity to gain leadership experience; it is a useful ‘stepping-stone’, yet not necessarily a destination to aim for. Indeed, some PLs describe how the role curtailed some avenues for their own development, notably in research/scholarship.

- This relates to the precarity and 'burnout' some PLs describe. The heavy workload, wide-ranging responsibilities and relative prominence as a figurehead for the programme can lead to a cycle where new PLs are appointed every few years (following either promotion, replacement or burnout). This represents a challenge to the subject area since the timeline for affecting change may well be longer than the lifecycle of a PL; importantly, the PLs we interviewed who had been in post for longer and who had experienced more sustainable models of course leadership were most positive about the status and stability of their programmes.
- This common set of challenges is captured concisely by one of the Education PLs in our survey:
 - *"I doubt we are alone in being almost completely driven by NSS and overwhelmed with programme admin. We're losing sight of our subject and constantly have to defend it, [our team has halved in size in my time here]; it's very much a numbers driven culture and we know if our numbers drop the courses will be closed. Everything we should be doing to improve student experience we aren't. Scholarly activity is being squeezed out as central services are delegated to programme leads and overwhelming amounts of tasks others used to support us in doing are now my responsibility. Everything from marketing, attendance monitoring to grade entry has become 'my responsibility'. The actual discipline, research in it and the teaching of it has become slightly lost and collegiality is becoming frayed as colleagues quite sensibly protect themselves from burn out"* [Education PL in a post-92 university]

3. How do UG Education Programme Leaders see the current health and future of UG Education Studies/Education programmes?

- PLs describe their own and their colleagues' commitment to serving and supporting students from diverse backgrounds – a key strength of UG Education programmes and a protective factor against the challenges faced.
- The most common concern raised by the PLs relating to the health and future of undergraduate Education courses is the perennial issue of course identity, again centred around the relationship with ITE. This is identified as a core current concern.
 - For those undergraduate courses that are not teacher preparation programmes, Programme Leaders describe a constant effort to reiterate the nature and purpose of their courses.
 - This is cited as an issue both within and outside of their institutions: applicants need careful explanations of the differences, but so do colleagues in other departments. In several cases, PLs noted that colleagues *within their own departments* tended to misunderstand or downplay the differences.
 - Importantly, the work to reiterate and make the case for a distinct study of education that is not teacher preparation falls to the PL; we might see this as both the core role and source of the main issues faced by the UG Education PL.
- These challenges are exacerbated by the current discourse of 'value for money' and instrumentalised framings of the purpose of an undergraduate degree. This was highlighted as a current and certainly a future issue for the health and status of UG Education degrees.
 - As Government ministers argue for 'high value' degrees and as HE institutions begin closing courses, PLs are very aware of their programme's vulnerability, especially smaller and newer courses.
 - They describe the tension between securing the future of their programme by emphasising the seamless route into the teaching profession, and on the other hand wanting to avoid making - or to caveat - that link.
 - Often PLs suggest that a broad Education degree is beneficial *precisely because it does not* lead to one career option. This tension highlights a central concern for the future of UG Education degrees: if a course identity is shaped around the critical study of education, what are the ways it can exist and thrive amid the shifting landscapes of HE and teacher education?

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats to the field of UG Education degrees

To summarise the factors in play with respect to the health, status and future of the field, we have produced a SWOT analysis:

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Popular choice for students• Committed staff who champion the purpose and value of course• Range of courses in different settings• Student-centred pedagogies and strong pastoral care• Students often from ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds; building wider UG participation and opportunities	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of clarity in and outside of institutions about what non-teacher education UG programmes are ‘for’• Lower status than teacher education programmes• Incoherence of field (recent diversification of courses; more or less overlap with teacher education)• Student cohorts can need a high level of academic and pastoral support, but courses sometimes under-staffed and resourced
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To raise awareness of purpose and value of UG education courses• To develop a conceptual map of the courses available (enabling a sense of coherence and adding clarity to the dimensions of the field)• To recognise and emphasise ‘employability’ options beyond teaching• To include FE colleagues in wider community of Education Studies• To build on links with local communities and groups	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Will non-teacher education courses lose students as applicants opt for clearer routes into employment or training?• Might such courses become solely preparation for teaching/teacher training?• What impact might the Government’s ITT market review have on UG provision?• Insufficient matching of staff resources to student numbers/needs.• Programme Leaders are key innovators in the field and champions for the subject, but accountability regimes, middle management duties and heavy admin responsibilities limits their scope.

Conclusions and Implications

1. In many respects, PLs of Education degrees and PLs of non-education related degrees report similar experiences and challenges – suggesting that **PLs in Education can look to institution-wide networks for common ground (avoiding a tendency to feel their challenges are entirely unique and therefore to become isolated within their institutions).**
2. Yet for Education courses, their place within departmental structures and institutional hierarchies appears to be of particular importance – both practically (e.g., its role in

bolstering student numbers) and philosophically (the role and purpose of the course in relation to teacher education) – suggesting that **organisational arrangements and course status/role should be core concerns for Heads of Departments who wish to nurture these UG Education courses and support their PLs.**

3. In the diverse UG education course market, where programmes more or less overlap with teacher education and all are similarly categorised/named, course identity and purpose are central issues – suggesting that **work to construct an overarching typology of UG Education-related courses on offer and to conceptually map the distinctive features of each type would be valuable.**
4. Our research has identified some differences in the challenges faced by Education PLs in different institutions, though many broad similarities. Many of the challenges are amplified when leading HE Education programmes in FE – suggesting that **more research could be conducted in this specific context, with the aim to support those colleagues in their roles.**
5. Innovation and development of the subject area is most likely to come from (or certainly through) the PL, yet high administrative workloads and pressures of accountability regimes can limit horizons of possibility and lead to a high turnover of PLs – suggesting that **models of collaborative or shared programme leadership could scaffold longer-term course development and innovation in the field, as well as insulate individuals from the challenges of the role.**
6. Though becoming a PL might open-up leadership career opportunities, there is a perceived curtailment of personal development opportunities in areas of research and scholarship – suggesting that **PLs (and prospective PLs) need support and guidance to navigate their career journeys. This may also improve the appeal of taking on a PL role.**

In summary, the subject association could support the development of:

- reference materials for PLs that conceptually map, describe and champion the role of Education-related UG degree programmes (in both contrast to and as complimentary to teacher education courses), recognising the coherence of these UG courses but also celebrating and valuing their diversity;
- a network of PLs that offers support for shared issues and facilitates development of joint innovations;
- a renewed focus on engaging PLs in Further Education settings, with the aim of including those colleagues in the wider community of Education Studies;
- practice-based guides for departmental organisation, covering a range of models of programme leadership (e.g., collaborative/shared);
- tailored training sessions and/or mentoring support for PLs, aiding them as they navigate their career journeys (e.g., in leadership and in research/scholarship).

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