



## Editorial – The Initial Teacher Education Research Programme: Is it a Robust or Token ‘Evidence Base’?

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The Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Teachers Council commissioned four research studies into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) that were undertaken in 2004 and 2005. Their aim was to establish an ‘evidence base’ that could be used to evaluate previous critiques of ITE that questioned the quality of programmes and graduates and provide a foundation for future policy directions by both bodies. Janet Rivers summarised the key findings of these four studies in the Ministry of Education publication, *Initial Teacher Education Research Programme: A Summary of Four Studies* (Ministry of Education, 2006). She concludes that it is ‘imperative to ensure providers are delivering the best initial teacher education possible’ (p.31).

The Summary outlines a number of important political, ideological, economic, and contextual issues including:

- ✚ the deregulation of teacher education in the 1990s that resulted in the explosion of ITE providers from a handful of specialist colleges of education to the situation in 2005 where there are 27 providers;
- ✚ the introduction of a competitive market place and student funding model in ITE where providers now compete nationally for prospective student teachers (and their student fees) within a ‘bums on seats’ model of tertiary funding;
- ✚ the rapid growth of qualifications and programmes where there were by 2005, 85 different qualifications being offered (accompanied by a large variety of delivery modes); and
- ✚ the series of reviews of ITE by various arms of the state that had as a starting point supposed concerns or ‘crises’ about the quality of ITE.

The Summary concludes that the government needs a programme of systematic research in ITE in order to inform future policy and practice. We couldn’t agree more but the Summary raises more questions than answers and in two areas in particular.

First, while critical contextual issues are raised, few solutions as yet from the research programme are offered. We would argue that one cannot research any aspect of ITE without seriously addressing these influential contextual issues. The deregulation of teacher education has led to a proliferation of providers, programmes, qualifications, and modes of delivery to the extent that it has become extremely difficult for prospective student teachers, teacher education providers, regulatory bodies, and the community to discern the quality or effectiveness of the diverse range of teacher education being provided in Aotearoa New Zealand. In addition, the competitive tertiary education and contestable funding environment has, in our opinion, hindered collaborative educational efforts, marginalised teacher education providers (because they have come to be viewed as biased 'stakeholders'), spread scarce public monies too thinly and permitted an extremely wasteful duplication of educational resources in ITE. Furthermore, current New Zealand Teachers Council approval, monitoring and review processes operate on an inflexible, no-trust basis, requiring the most experienced initial teacher education providers to jump through exactly the same exhaustive compliance hoops as the smallest, least experienced niche provider. We would like to see the scope of future ITE research expanded to critically reflect on these sorts of contextual areas in considerably more depth.

Second, does the research programme outlined in the Summary so far really provide the sort of depth, breadth and length of inquiry that would provide that sound 'evidence base' for quality policy development? While all four studies contribute important and useful information to the debate, only two are sufficiently robust for that purpose (while two of the studies are described as 'working papers'). We would argue that significant investment and thought be given to a much stronger broad-based, in-depth and longitudinal research programme on ITE because, as the Summary perceptively signals, ITE in New Zealand is indeed 'complex and diverse'.

From past experience we know that state bureaucracies often like to move faster than well-funded and deliberative research programmes (a fundamental but flawed outcome of political life?). However, we would caution against the Minister, the Ministry of Education, and the New Zealand Teachers Council seeking to implement significant cross-sector policy developments around ITE without first having a sound base of robust research to inform policy development – otherwise, it is unlikely that such policy will be of a high quality, that the outcomes will be desirable, or that all involved in the ITE endeavour will be framed to support the delivery of 'the best initial teacher education possible' (however so that might be defined).

If rash policy-making does occur in the meantime, what is after all the point of embarking on an Initial Teacher Education Research Programme?

## REFERENCES

- Rivers, J. (Ed.). (2006). *Initial Teacher Education Research Programme: A Summary of Four Studies*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.