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The Perfect Storm for Teacher Education Research in English Universities: The Tensions of Workload, Expectations from Leadership and Research

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Abstract: In this paper, we report on data from our survey of the university Initial Teacher Education (ITE) sector in England, concerning responses to questions about perceptions of workload and research. Our survey collects responses annually (since 2021) from approximately 12% of the cohort, and includes questions on a variety of topics, with Likert scale and text responses. Here, we report on three interconnected areas with potential impacts on the future of teacher education in England, and with pertinent findings for other nations, including research expectations and opportunities, workload, and the extent to which university leaders understand ITE. Our data show that academics working in ITE face high workloads, and importantly, very little time for research, and in some cases, low expectations from their institutions in terms of their research output. We compare this picture with systematic review findings about the predominantly insider research nature of ITE research in England, and implications for a sector that has no time, energy, or opportunity to carry out research on their own practice and experience. We consider the impact of these patterns for teacher educators' work and the longer-term sustainability of individuals, the sector, and the research evidence for teacher education.

Keywords: initial teacher education; academics; ITE; ITT; England; research; workload; creativity; insider research

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the work of initial teacher educators in universities in England. Initial Teacher Education (also sometimes known as pre-service teacher education) and those who work within this sector have been identified as being under-researched (Ellis et al., 2013). Where research does exist, it is often focused on pre-service student teachers (e.g., Van Katwijk et al., 2023) or teacher education pedagogy (e.g., Chan et al., 2023), and critical areas of research, such as teacher educator well-being, stress, and burnout is an 'under-researched area, and that there is a dearth of current evidence-based literature in this field' (Turner & Garvis, 2023, p. 1). The work we report here is focused on university-based Initial Teacher Education (ITE) because of the unique position of this sector, which has become a government target for downgrading and reform since at least 2010 (Spendlove, 2024). In addition, there is widespread agreement that ITE academics are subject to a 'level of instruction handed down by government about curricula and pedagogy [which] would be considered extraordinary and unacceptable for most other areas of university provision' (Gill, 2024).

Whilst the focus here is on university-based provision for ITE in England, a country that is considered an outlier in terms of ITE policy (Ellis & Childs, 2024; Mutton & Burn, 2024), the experiences of academics working in this sector are to some extent applicable to the similar groups in other countries, where issues with research capacity, support, and expectation were highlighted, as well as high and intense workloads and restrictions on professional creativity (Van Nuland et al., 2024). Indeed, negative aspects identified for teacher educators in Sweden relate to 'concerns about a heavy workload, professional ambiguity and a lack of time for scholarly pursuits' (Malm, 2020, p. 351). Studies from Ireland also highlight issues of workload and professional identity (Leahy et al., 2025; Young et al., 2022), suggesting that whilst the situation in England is unique from a policy perspective, many issues are shared internationally. For these reasons, this paper may also be of interest to those working in ITE in other countries, and to anyone who has an interest in the future of pre-service teacher education and initial teacher educators. It is important to understand the context of ITE in England in order to appreciate the impact of recent changes on academics working in the sector. In the next section, we will outline the state of the sector in England and present the research literature concerning the workload of initial teacher educators and their capacity, resources, and support for conducting and engaging in research themselves.

1.1. Initial Teacher Education or Training (ITE or ITT)?

In England, pre-service teacher preparation is commonly called 'ITE' (Initial Teacher Education) or 'ITT' (Initial Teacher Training). These terms are widely used across the sector, and some argue that emphasising 'education' rather than 'training' highlights the complexity and length of the journey to becoming a teacher (Chitty, 2009). It might also be argued that working in an educative role naturally entails criticality, scholarship, and research, as opposed to fulfilling a training role that might be wholly pedagogic in nature. Consequently, we have opted to use the term 'ITE' unless directly quoting other authors or policy documents.

1.2. The State and Status of University-Based Initial Teacher Education in England

England has 'the most tightly regulated and centrally controlled system of ITE anywhere in the world' (Ellis & Childs, 2024, p. 1). Significant policy developments in the sector since 2019 mean that ITE providers must meet the minimum requirements of the Department for Education (DfE) ITT Criteria (DfE, 2023) and the Initial Teacher Training Early Career Framework (ITTECF) (DfE, 2024), a centrally dictated national framework for ITE provision which includes both education during a pre-service period and the first two years of qualified, in-post work undertaken by teachers. These policy changes and the related 'churn' in ITE practice have come about because the ITE sector has become central to government attempts to reform education as a whole (la Velle et al., 2020), and hence there has been a rise in micromanagement from the centre. As a result, individuals and teams involved in ITE have faced considerable challenges in retaining sustainable work practices and opportunities for academic development (Wood & Quickfall, 2024).

A major part of the challenges faced by the sector is the increased workload stemming from a sector-wide 'market review' and a subsequent accreditation process for ITE providers. Additionally, the introduction of a Core Content Framework (CCF) (DfE, 2019) just months before the pandemic meant that ITE providers were required to align their curricula with this national framework at a time of extreme workload. In addition, it is necessary to exceed the requirements laid out in the framework in order to comply with Department for Education (DfE) regulations. To provide context, the CCF outlined the essential content that all programmes were expected to include and be organised into five

core areas: behaviour management, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and professional behaviours (DfE, 2019). Failure to comply with the CCF could lead to poor inspection results or even the closure of programmes (Ellis & Childs, 2024). Almost immediately, the CCF faced substantial criticism, particularly regarding the limited scope of its evidence base. Critics questioned the narrow focus on classroom readiness when teaching is a complex, relational expertise (Mutton & Burn, 2024). The approach to teaching was similarly restricted, with some arguing that it overlooked broader considerations, such as values, socialisation, or the cultivation of citizenship in a democratic society (Hordern & Brooks, 2023, p. 812). Consequently, the CCF has been replaced with the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF) (DfE, 2024), adding to further need for revision and work by those within the sector.

1.3. Work of Academics in Initial Teacher Education

As previously expressed, there is limited research on initial teacher educator roles (Ellis et al., 2013), but there are data to suggest that workloads for individual academics working in this sector are high and, importantly, intense in nature (Clapham et al., 2023; Murray & Kosnik, 2011). The current ITE system in England, like those in other countries, such as Australia and the USA, has high demands in terms of teacher educator workloads and accountability (Cochran-Smith, 2021). Leahy et al. carried out research with ITE academics in Ireland and advocated for 'the promotion and organic integration within the university systems and structure. . . to address relevant matters' (p. 9) such as high workloads. There are positive aspects of these roles that have also been reported, such as strong colleague support, fulfilment from working with student teachers, and opportunities for creativity (Wood & Quickfall, 2024, see Table 1 below), but the complex and competing demands of the role impact the well-being and effectiveness of teacher educators. Spencer (2013) goes further and identifies three issues with teacher educator work: 'omission, trivialization, and condemnation'.

Table 1. Survey results of ITE academics 2021–2024 (Wood & Quickfall, 2024, p. 9).

Question	2021/22 (*n* = 159)	2022/23 (*n* = 142)	2023/24 (*n* = 166)
I enjoy working in a university ITE role	85%	83%	87%
I have supportive colleagues to work with	90%	94%	93%
I enjoy working with ITE students	97%	99%	99%
The leaders of my institution are supportive of ITE	65%	46%	31%
The leaders of my department are supportive of ITE	n/a	81%	81%
The leaders of my institution understand ITE	53%	28%	51%

1.3.1. Omission

Teacher educators may be omitted from cross faculty initiatives in their own institutions because they are seen as practitioners rather than academics (Ellis et al., 2013). We do know that in many countries, teacher educators are recruited because they are successful school teachers (Geerdink et al., 2016), and so their contributions to other areas of university work may not be recognised. Teacher educators constitute a 'particular class of academic workers, subject to different expectations to their non-teacher educator colleagues working under different material conditions' (Ellis et al., 2013, p. 268). For example, teacher educators may find they are expected to know how to teach adults without any training and may find that they are not expected to engage in research.

In the wider work of the ITE sector, teacher educator omission from government policymaking has been widely documented despite key political figures decrying the influence of academics on education policy (Gibb, 2014). For example, the National Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011), which are used to assess student teachers before their recommendation for Qualified Teacher Status, were drawn up by a 15-strong committee, only 1 of whom was a university representative (Spencer, 2013). More recently, the controversial Market Review panel, which recommended reaccreditation of providers, also only included one representative from university teacher education (DfE, 2021). Yet, both of these policies have a significant impact on the work of teacher educators and, in the case of reaccreditation, on their workload.

1.3.2. Trivialisation

The nature of teacher educator work may lead to trivialisation (Spencer, 2013). Ellis et al. (2013) argue that a large amount of teacher educator work is centred on relationship building activities, such as pastoral work, mentoring, and responding to emails. Because the teacher educator role is close to the professional practice of teachers (in England, the vast majority of teacher educators are qualified and classroom-experienced teachers of children), they are expected to be credible to school partners whilst also being credible in their higher education setting, a juxtaposition of expectations that may not be easily compatible. Ellis et al. (2013) state that to say teacher educators are 'between a rock and a hard place seems something of an understatement' (Ellis et al., 2013, p. 279) due to the flexibility and adaptability required of them, which is rarely properly appreciated outside of their departments. Clapham et al. (2023) similarly express this friction from working across 'the higher education and school sectors: requirements that must be negotiated just to fulfil the day job' (Clapham et al., 2023, p. 9). Within the wider university sector, the nature and intensity of teacher educator workload and the many hours spent on the 'immediate and repetitive chores of our work' (Spencer, 2013, p. 303) are not recognised in the same way as other work, such as research-intense activities.

1.3.3. Condemnation

In the 2021–2022 academic year, the government introduced the accreditation 'market review' process, which had been delayed from 2020 due to the pandemic (DfE, 2022). The government decided that all institutions providing teacher education, both higher education (HE)- and non-HE-based, would need to apply and meet requirements to continue offering ITE programmes from Autumn 2024 (DfE, 2022). This involved a two-stage process, which required providers to submit detailed applications, including curriculum plans and examples of teaching and learning resources to meet the new future requirements, all based on government-specified principles and methods, to gain accreditation and continue training new teachers. For established providers, some of whom had been offering ITE for over a century, the requirement to demonstrate 'market readiness' was a point of frustration and concern. Meanwhile, new providers with no prior experience in delivering ITE were already marketing themselves as 'outstanding' or 'flagship' providers (Walker, 2022). All appeals made after the first stage of the process were denied, even though some long-established providers with strong or excellent Ofsted outcomes and proven records of ITE success failed to meet the pass mark by only a few points (Walker, 2022), leading to seemingly arbitrary cases of condemnation within the sector.

1.4. Research Capacity and Expectations in Initial Teacher Education

The importance of research into and about teacher education is widely recognised. In England, the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers published a position paper named The Intellectual Base of Teacher Education (UCET, 2020), which sets out

the importance of a research informed sector and it is widely agreed that 'the profession of teaching should be research-informed as a basic premise of education' (la Velle, 2023, p. 1). Research insights into Initial Teacher Education and the systems and people that support this vital stage in the profession are of particular importance during a decade long recruitment and retention crisis in teaching (McLean et al., 2024).

Morris et al. (2023) report distinct challenges for researchers working in ITE, citing particular circumstances affecting their roles and 'opportunities for engaging with and conducting research' (Morris et al., 2023, p. 57). Teacher educators, as previously discussed, may not be considered as researchers in the same way university staff in other departments are framed. Teaching and research may be seen as 'two distinct professional cultures' (Oancea et al., 2021, p. 114) with teacher education academics placed in the teaching camp, probably because of their standing as expert teachers in their career history and persistent views of teacher education as a professional, rather than academic, department in some higher education institutes. Ellis et al. (2013) found that teacher educators were driven to focus their time on the quality assurance of school partnerships and pastoral support of students and that workload management was generally unsuitable for taking into account the unique requirements of teacher education. Oancea et al. (2021) also found that universities may be reluctant to invest in teacher education research, perhaps through a lack of understanding of the importance and relevance of such research and possibly through a lack of funding available for this work. Swennen et al. (2010) suggest that teacher educators require external pressure in order to become researchers because otherwise other workloads will always fill their time, and that their professional development in terms of research must be facilitated by their institutions.

The impact of these difficulties and limiting expectations can be seen in national data. Clapham et al. (2023) analysed the Research Excellence Framework Education submissions from 12 universities in 2013. Of the 1600 research outputs, 5.5% was focused on Initial Teacher Education, and the research team suggested that an analysis of outputs for REF 2021 may show a drop to 4.8% in ITE-related outputs. Clapham et al. (2023) also found that institutional outputs for ITE are often written by one academic, suggesting that this may be an individual interest rather than an institutional strategy, with the fragility of a single researcher who may not continue the research. This is concerning for the sector but also for the wider education discipline, in consideration of how fragile these research insights and any linked innovations may be (Cochran-Smith, 2005).

As outlined above, teacher educator workloads are often heavy and involve high levels of pastoral and collaborative activity (Ellis et al., 2013), which may not be easily compatible with research. Tensions between the roles of teacher educator and researcher were noted in several studies, including Czerniawski et al. (2018), although it should be noted that universities running ITE programmes vary hugely, from research-intensive universities to newer providers with a more teaching-intensive focus. Some teacher educators may find that their institution has high expectations of their research engagement and outputs, with performance management targets in this area, whilst others may feel their universities downplay the importance of research for their department, favouring a focus on student income and therefore teaching focused work. Teacher educators may find themselves negotiating barriers to engaging in research. Barriers include time pressures, workload, lack of support, lack of funding, lack of training, and precarious employment conditions (Oancea et al., 2021). Participants in Oancea et al.'s (2021) study reported that overbearing accountability regimes at the organisational level restricted the space for 'the development and exercise of research-rich professional agency' (Oancea et al., 2021, p. 114). Internationally, in the USA, Cochran-Smith identified three areas of research in teacher education: one occupied by researchers who are also teacher educators, a second by social scientists,

and a third by university teacher educators using their own programmes to do small-scale research (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015). In Scotland, teacher educators are expected to carry heavy teaching loads and student support whilst also being 'chastised' for not producing research (Ellis et al., 2013, p. 277). Heavy workloads and difficulty in engaging in research were also noted in Sweden and Ireland (Leahy et al., 2025; Malm, 2020; Young et al., 2022).

Research on teacher educators is limited, likely because most studies in Initial Teacher Education are conducted by ITE academics themselves, who predominantly focus on their students and educational settings rather than examining their own professional experiences. Where research does develop, it tends to take the form of 'insider research'. In support of this view, we trawled the four journals published in partnership with BERA (British Educational Research Association) between 2021 and 2024, which identified 34 articles focusing on ITE over that period. Of these, as far as we could reasonably confirm, 26 articles had at least one author working on ITE programmes. International literature, which is also scarce, would suggest this is also an issue in other countries.

The literature we have reflected on here shows a sector under immense pressure, with constant, large-scale change from outside the academy, with little recognition of the large contribution made to supplying the country with the teachers it needs, adding to pressure from within universities themselves. Internal issues include a tendency not to see ITE academics as serious researchers and expecting them to focus instead on teaching tasks to ensure student satisfaction and retain healthy partnerships with local schools. In this context, we wish to understand the experiences and reflections of ITE academics in this particular paper, considering the expectations of leaders, the impact on workloads, and the resultant tensions concerning the development of research agendas.

2. Materials and Methods

To address the gap in our understanding of ITE academic work, we decided it was essential to explore the experiences of those involved in ITE in England through a longitudinal study, taking a pragmatic research approach, that began with an initial survey in the 2021/22 academic year (Wood & Quickfall, 2024) with subsequent surveys each year since. The surveys collect Likert scale response data and open text questions, so as to allow respondents to share their reflections and experiences. The data presented here includes Likert scale data from the first three years of this five-year longitudinal study, but text responses focus on the most recent data collected in May–September 2024. This pattern of analysis is because, for the 2023/24 survey, we added a question about research and knowledge exchange activity specifically, following requests from participants.

We created a comprehensive questionnaire to gather the perspectives and reflections of teacher educators working in higher education institutions (see Supplementary Materials for the full schedule). The survey focused on the following key themes:

- The ITE environment (workload, leadership roles, relationships).
- Workload challenges.
- Accreditation and Ofsted.
- The future of work in ITE.

We designed the questionnaire using our own insider knowledge of the sector in England, drawing upon themes raised through sector networks such as UCET. Taking a pragmatic approach, we have adapted the survey over time to reflect requests and feedback from participants.

In 2023/24, we added the following question to the workload theme: 'I have enough time to undertake research, knowledge exchange, and/or scholarship in 2023/24'.

Each theme included both Likert scale and open-ended questions, allowing for quantitative data to reflect the whole cohort view, and more detailed subjective insights. The

questionnaire included 19 Likert scale questions and eight open text questions. Participants were not required to respond to the open-ended questions, resulting in between 70 and 90 responses to these sections, on average, across three years of the survey.

The questionnaire was distributed online via a link or QR code, with promotion through social media platforms (X, formerly Twitter) and professional networks, including the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET). The survey was open for four months each year (May to September), with regular reminders posted on social media and in the UCET newsletter, which is circulated among university-based ITE providers.

The responses are given in Table 2, showing relatively consistent returns across the three years from an estimated 1281 teacher educators in higher education institutions, according to data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the 2021/22 academic year. This represents an approximate 13% response rate from the HE teacher educator population. However, the number may slightly overestimate the response rate, as some teacher educators may be categorised differently in the HESA data from individual universities. Taking a pragmatic, qualitative approach, our data allows for 'fuzzy generalisation' (Bassey & Pratt, 2003) that gives an indication of the sector overall. We offer some basic descriptive statistics from the questionnaire, and text comments sharing views to answer abductive research questions. We point out the response rate to show the level of engagement across the sector.

Table 2. Participant numbers over three years of the project, 2021–2024.

2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
159 participants	142 participants	167 participants

3. Analysis

We analysed text-based responses using thematic analysis for each question. Our process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis of (1) familiarisation; (2) coding; (3) generating themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) reporting and a semantic, inductive approach, looking for surface-level meaning in the text, without a pre-agreed range of themes we wanted to find.

We carried out our analysis separately, reading through responses and noting recurring themes, then compared key themes we had identified for each section of the survey. Themes were generally easily identified in these short (10–200 word range) responses, and as a research team, we spanned the insider/outsider research divide, as one of us is a current teacher educator whilst the other works in the wider education discipline. This supported our analysis in terms of safeguarding against the teacher educator picking out their own priority themes from the data.

3.1. Sample Characteristics

Our participant sample was opportunistic—we did not set out to find a particular subset of ITE academics and did not set minimum or maximum sample sizes. The sample gathered was broadly representative of the university ITE sector and reflects the types of institutions involved, e.g., pre- and post-1992 universities, Russell Group, and new universities. There was a spread of experience in ITE roles, from those very new to the sector to participants with over twenty years in university ITE. A range of leadership and management roles were also represented, including programme leaders, heads of departments, and specialist roles such as school partnerships lead. Participants were a majority full-time, permanent staff, but part-time, fixed term, and hourly paid academics were also represented in the data. The gender split roughly represented the split for education more generally (75% women), and primary and secondary were roughly equally

represented, with smaller numbers of early years and further education ITE academics, as we would expect and reflecting the sector.

3.2. Ethics

We followed the BERA (2018) ethical guidelines throughout this project and sought and gained ethical approval from both universities. Participants were informed of the aims, risks, and data management details of the project and consent was confirmed via the online questionnaire introduction.

We considered the emotive topics covered by the questionnaire and signposted sources of support as part of the survey design.

4. Results

4.1. Leaders' Understanding of Teacher Education

In 2023/24, 51% of participants reported that their university leaders understood ITE, up from 28% in 2022/23. In 2022/23, we reworded the question to refer to leaders of institutions rather than university leaders, as we felt that some participants had interpreted this to mean their departmental leaders in 2021/22 (see Table 3, below).

Table 3. Three year data for leader perceptions of ITE showing the percentage of positive respondents ('agree' and 'strongly agree' responses to Likert scale questions).

Question	2021/22 (n = 159)	2022/23 (n = 142)	2023/24 (n = 166)
The leader of my institution understand ITE	53%	28%	51%

Many participants commented on the lack of understanding by leaders beyond their department, in fact, no text-based comments suggested that university leaders have a good understanding of ITE, with the following comment being typical of responses:

'It's a great job. But very few folks in HE leadership understand ITE!'

Some went further in explaining the distinct nature of teacher education:

'SLT (Senior leadership team) try to understand, they really do—but ITE is an outlier in so many respects.'

Participants described misunderstandings around timetabling (ITE programmes often follow a much longer academic year calendar than other university programmes) and the vital importance of placements in the programmes. Meanwhile, compliance with DfE requirements was often reported as better understood by leaders; however, this was sometimes to the detriment of a richer understanding.

'Leaders, I believe, know that they have to follow whatever requirements are set for ITE, and that is what seems to be the driving factor rather than a deep appreciation of what it means to be involved in teacher education.'

Where leaders did have an understanding of the ITE sector, this was around requirements for Ofsted inspection and meeting DfE criteria rather than the theoretical, pedagogical, and philosophical aspects of teacher education. Where participants shared more detailed responses, they reported a complex range of misunderstandings and frustrations by leaders concerning the distinct nature of ITE.

'There is a relentless pressure to dumb down assignments and to standardise assignment formats. Workloads are overly burdensome. Staff autonomy is increasingly eroded. Senior management is incompetent and malicious. The relationship between research and teaching is grossly undervalued.'

> *'ITT has always been, in my experience, restrictive and performative. This has only become more so in the last 2–3 years. There is an uneasy fit within traditional academic departments due to lack of a lived experience by senior leaders and comparative colleagues that impacts upon expectation and draws frustration and division. All of this simmers beneath the surface as a process of 'Keep Calm and Carry On' for the students and, ultimately, the children continues.'*

Participants like the one above noted the lack of understanding at the leadership level between engaging in research and teaching student teachers, and other participants reported a similar issue with university leaders and government.

> *'My ambivalence about ITE is due to a) internal factors related to management not understanding the role and, consequently inbuilt sense of failure due to my lack of research output b) external factors, including hostile government'*

Many participants reported in text-based comments that universities (the micro level in this quote) do not understand the purpose and value of university ITE sufficiently well.

> *'I feel very concerned for the future of the sector. The ascendancy of neo- liberal pollical intervention at the micro level has resulted in students being trained to perform a tick list of competencies that lack theoretical foundations rather than be educated- I see this as undermining professionalism. The same agenda devalues academic staff.'*

Some participants felt very strongly about the lack of understanding from the government, and particularly the Department for Education, going as far as saying that the lack of understanding is a strategy rather than a blind spot.

> *'This is the new normal, permanent revolution of a political class convinced that they know, and have always known, what 'the answers' are to the issues the system faces, even as they change their minds about what those issues are or what should be done about them. . . Designed to "move quickly and break things", ... this will be another half-baked disaster which we will have to work on.'*

4.2. Workload and Its Impact

Over three years of Likert scale data, the responses on workload were consistently poor. In 2023/24, 25% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their workload was manageable during that academic year, 26% agreed or strongly agreed that they could switch off from work after working hours, a slight improvement on previous years, and 28% agreed or strongly agreed that they had enough time to complete work to a standard acceptable to them. For comparative three-year data, see Table 4 below.

Table 4. Three-year data for workload questions showing the percentage of positive respondents ('agree' and 'strongly agree' responses to Likert scale questions).

Question	2021/22 (*n* = 159)	2022/23 (*n* = 142)	2023/24 (*n* = 166)
My workload has been manageable this year	29%	25%	25%
I can easily 'switch off' from work, outside of my work hours	18%	18%	26%
I have enough time to get my work done this year, to a standard acceptable to me	25%	29%	28%

Text responses from academics in 2023/24 suggested that the workload was overwhelming for some, strongly reflecting comments made in previous years. Many comments referred to overwork, with teacher educator work such as planning, marking, and attending to emails pushing into evenings and weekends on a regular basis.

> *'Impossible workload, no tasks removed, only added, working evenings and weekends every week.'*

Some participants explored in further detail what might underpin over-work in the sector:

> *'Because the role is so intense and so personal, it is almost impossible to switch off, and despite being part-time I still work well over my hours because it simply doesn't fit into the workload regime that we have. We work in education with people and that doesn't in any way fit into fixed hourly allocation.'*

The relational aspects of the role, as highlighted in work by Ellis et al. (2013), appear in many comments from participants. Pressures from other aspects of the role, such as supporting student mental health and well-being and securing school placements and training mentors, and the national context for ITE and the university sector are also reported as having an impact on workload in 2023/24.

> *'The pressures are so huge. I'm constantly told I'm lucky to have a job that we need to increase numbers but are losing staff all the time. A number of my colleagues are off on long term medical leave for mental health, further exacerbating the workload for the rest of us.'*

This includes a sense from participants that overwork has been normalised and accepted in the sector, particularly as the majority of ITE academics have worked for many years in schools, where intense workloads and overwork are also the expectation.

> *'I answer these questions with the caveat that workload is manageable in comparison to how unmanageable it is in teaching English within secondary schools.'*

The recent overhaul of ITE in England, via the CCF, Market Review, and Accreditation processes, and associated rapid and wholesale redesign of courses and materials has also had an inevitable impact on academics and their attitude to the nature of their workloads.

> *'There is so much change all the time that I've chosen to not overthink/over prepare as it is likely whatever I do/produce will be replaced quickly. All feels a bit pointless so I'm protecting myself by disengaging slightly from the madness.'*

Some participant comments reflected an intensification of workload because of changes in the sector, as well as an increase in work hours, and many linked this to policy reforms and implementation, such as the reaccreditation process.

> *'The persistent impact of the reaccreditation process, Ofsted, and internal university uncertainty has meant that I have felt on 'high alert' for a very long time.'*

This increase in workload was tied to its limiting impact on research in many of the text comments, with some participants identifying their perceptions on where this could be addressed and by whom.

> *'Research is massively impacted by the excess expectations of ITE. I love ITE, but there is no doubt it is a time sink, and that is not recognised by management in a sufficient way to counterbalance (i.e., hire enough staff to reduce burden across all staff and allow for research time).'*

4.3. Research Expectations and Opportunities

As Figure 1 shows, the majority of participants (81%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had time to undertake research, scholarship, and knowledge exchange activities in 2023/24, with the largest group (47%) strongly disagreeing with the statement.

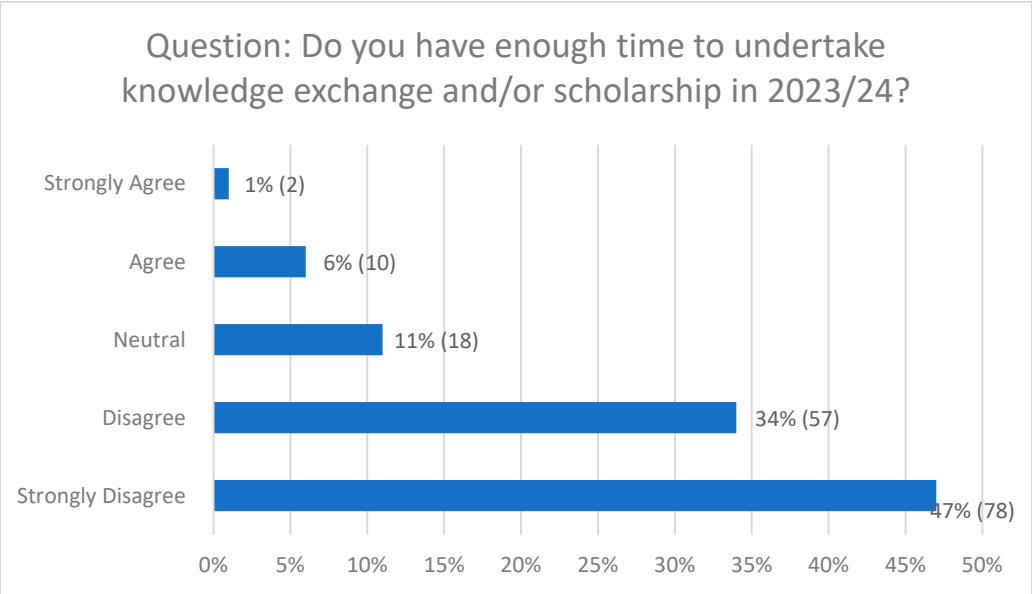

Figure 1. ITE academics' perceptions concerning their perceptions of the time they have available for research, knowledge exchange, and scholarship-related activity. This was a new question for the 2023–24 survey.

Expectations of academics in terms of undertaking research, publication, and research funding varied greatly in the text-based responses, as many reported that research was not seen as part of their role, and they had to do this in their own time.

> *'For the majority of the year, to get my own research done, I need to either start from 5 am, work into the night, or work at the weekend. So, because that has not always been possible (especially with a young family, but even if I didn't have the kids, why should I have to do that??), my work gets pushed to the end of the year.'*

Others commented on researchers being undervalued because they specialise in ITE and identifying such attitudes as stemming from perceptions in the wider university:

> *'ITE staff are not seen as 'researchers' and are not taken seriously at times. Our department is very supportive, and they try but are hidebound by the wider, bigger university.'*

Some reported low expectations of them in terms of research but had a sense of relief that little or no pressure existed in this area of their work:

> *'Because of finances all research hours were cut for most members of staff. I found it a relief because I didn't need to find excuses for why I had no time whatsoever for doing research. There is never enough time to do the work allocated, and I've only survived by being paid part-time while working full-time.'*

Some academics felt that only narrowly defined research that met the government agenda was welcomed by leaders:

> *'Non-ITTECF research is not valued in my department- "trainees" are trained to be able to work in schools rather than engage critically with research from non-ideological perspectives that could broaden their capacity to educate children.'*

However, other academics reported high institutional expectations of them in terms of research that seem at odds with the rest of the role:

> *'My research, my entire reason for being part of HE, is constantly pushed to second place because 'the day job' is seen as most important. Yet, we are also being challenged to research, to write, to be part of a research culture that does not value ITE academics. Research is seen as a vanity project.'*

Whilst expectations of research varied by institution, many responses described the tension between university narratives around the importance of being 'research active' and the local overwork of the ITE role, together with a lack of understanding from departmental leaders who did not have an interest in research.

> *'Research is at the bottom of the list in ITE. Not all ITE staff are interested in writing papers or doing research, but I was very keen on this and found that little value was attached to it m. There is also resentment from other staff who, due to workload, are then burdened with your tasks if you are on conferences, writing retreats, or additional training sessions. It is a horrible environment to flourish in.'*

Several participants commented on a lack of encouragement from leaders when it came to research activity, which had an impact on motivation. Four participants also reported having suspended or withdrawn from doctoral programmes due to workload and lack of support.

> *'I have had to give up doing my doctorate due to workload. I do complete tasks efficiently and always meet deadlines, but this is only because I have been prepared to work at weekends and early mornings/late evenings. Other areas of my life have suffered as a result of this.'*

Whilst this was not a significant theme in the overall data, with only 4 of the 167 participants commenting on this experience, it is important. ITE academics are often recruited from teaching posts, with little opportunity to engage in doctoral study beforehand; reduced opportunities to undertake high level research qualifications during their academic careers are likely to have an impact on the research capacity of the sector overall. Anecdotally, outside of the survey, whilst it is still common for those entering from schools to be expected to complete master's degrees where necessary, there is an increasing lack of impetus for them to continue to study for doctorates, which are sometimes seen as a distraction.

5. Discussion

We theorise the factors impacting teacher educators in the English university sector as a perfect storm (see Figure 2), with challenges around time and capacity to undertake research, high workloads and low expectations from some university leaders, making their own research ambitions very difficult to achieve. Issues of omission, trivialisation, and condemnation in the sector and more widely in the government add a further set of challenges to this group in terms of being heard, valued, and included.

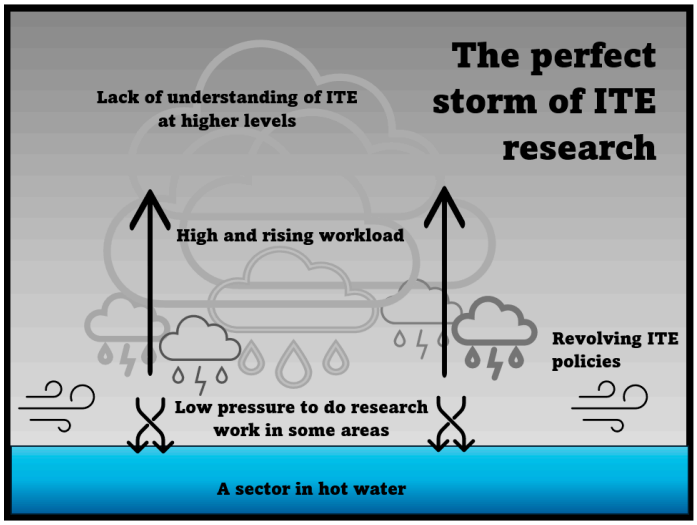

Figure 2. The perfect storm of ITE research.

5.1. Low Pressure to Undertake Research

The majority of participant comments gave support to Spencer's (2013) theory that trivialisation is a key issue in ITE. As detailed in the findings section, participants reported that they were not expected to do research, that their 'place' is teaching and professional expertise rather than academic recognition. This did vary, and some participants reported that expectations of them in terms of research were high and difficult to manage because of heavy workloads in other aspects of their roles. Alongside expectations, some participants commented on the research they were steered towards and the sorts of research activity that would be supported in their departments and wider university, often with a focus on government frameworks and approved theories. This represents a worrying emphasis on research that will not challenge current thinking, or present alternative views of the current government-subscribed narratives.

The majority of participant comments followed a workload theme and a sense that if they wanted to do research, no one in the institution would stop them; but likewise, no one in the institution was going to support them either, and research is therefore a hobby or unpaid overtime. The idea that teacher educators are employed for their professional expertise, and no further academic ambitions are required or desired by their institutions, is clearly commonly felt amongst participants. This also presents a worrying picture in terms of teacher educator identity and security within higher education, given the importance of research and scholarship activity to the survival of universities in England and more widely.

Whether participants were experiencing low expectations or not, the vast majority felt that they did not have time to do research and knowledge exchange. What seems clear is that if academics in ITE are not researching the sector, it is unlikely many others will come along to fill the gap. Clearly, part of the issue with research capacity for teacher educators is the rising workload and lack of understanding at higher levels.

5.2. High and Rising Workload

Our participants overwhelmingly reported their workload as problematic across the three years of data collection. This is in line with previous studies on ITE academic workload from England and internationally (Clapham et al., 2023; Cochran-Smith, 2021; Malm, 2020; Murray & Kosnik, 2011; Young et al., 2022), and whilst we do not have quantitative evidence to suggest that workload is increasing in terms of hours over time, many of our participants reported perceiving an increase in their workloads. In our analysis across participant responses, comments on the changing nature of their workload intensity, for example, how the workload for planning their sessions has not been intensified by additional accountability measures and considerations, were a key theme. This was sometimes attributed to government policy changes and implementation, including the Market Review and accreditation, but sometimes to local pressures within their university departments. Where workload intensity and quantity were also linked to staffing cuts for some participants, particularly where universities had lost accredited provider status and had closed departments or scaled back their provision when partnering with an accredited provider, the narrative is particularly stark. Academics must 'pick up the slack', or they are at risk of providing the university with more evidence that teacher education is a burden to the wider organisation. In addition, with the stress experienced by many participants, there appears to be a greater volume of absence linked to stress-related illness. This, in turn, puts greater pressure on those who then need to cover the work of absent colleagues, given the wider existential threats to university teacher education in England, USA, Australia, and the Netherlands where school-centred options are preferred by governments (Hoult et al., 2024).

The intensely relational and pastoral nature of teacher educator work (Ellis et al., 2013) means that changes in the sector are likely to affect the intensity and duration of workload as teacher educators manage these changes across their school partnerships and with their students. For example, the introduction of 20 h of mentor training as a requirement in the 2024/25 DfE ITT Criteria (this requirement was removed during the academic year 24/25, following petitioning from the sector) left teacher educators in a position of not only needing to create this training but also to convince schools and overworked class teachers that they had time to undertake this training. The trivialisation of teacher educator work in some universities is likely to mean that these relational and pastoral strains on workload are not acknowledged or compensated for, and this is also reflected in responses from our participants. Comments on institutional pressure to do more, sometimes with fewer resources and staff, were frequent in the responses. Still, we also found that many teacher educators reported the pressure they put on themselves to overwork out of concern for their students and colleagues.

5.3. Lack of Understanding of ITE at Higher Levels

Unfortunately, as evidenced in the findings section, our participants reported their perception of a lack of understanding of their work at higher levels, both within their institutions and in government and policymaking. Through the omission of teacher educators (Spencer, 2013) in steering groups and panels informing government policy and through a lack of research on teacher educators and their work more generally, two side-effects have come about. Firstly, changes that are implemented in teacher education are not informed by the sector and therefore do not take into account particular and distinct aspects of its work. Secondly, the severity of the storm that is brewing for teacher education research has not been forecast outside of the sector.

University leaders were often cited as lacking an understanding of ITE and the work of teacher educators, which is perhaps unsurprising given that the phrasing in the Likert scale question was about university leadership. Participants reported that leaders focused on compliance and risks associated with ITE delivery, such as de-accreditation and Ofsted inspection, but also reported a lack of appreciation for the nuances and complexities of their work; a focus on performativity and obedience, fitting the narrative of teacher education being trivialised in comparison to other university departments, where academic rigour and critique may be considered more important. Teacher educators' responses suggest that they perceive leaders as seeing them as deliverers of technical skills rather than academics who support their students in navigating complex ideas and theories.

5.4. Implications for the Sector

The three elements discussed above lead to the slow intensification of the revolving depression of a lack of sustainability within the sector, which may evolve into a destructive storm. The implications for the ITE sector are potentially serious. A perfect storm of high workloads, low expectations, and lack of understanding of the potential and role of teacher education in shaping the profession means that the insider researchers that produce the findings and recommendations for ITE will no longer be able to do so and those 'lone wolf' ITE researchers that Clapham et al. (2023) found were propping up ITE returns to the REF will no longer be able to sustain their contributions. If our sector is not producing research, there is a danger it will be informed by research from other education systems, without the nuance and context that local research would bring, or have findings from other parts of the education sector (for example, schools) applied to it, and as a group of professional experts, the knowledge and understanding that is held within our sector will go unpublished and misunderstood.

The potential impacts to the sector and the understanding of practice and experience are clear, but there are also personal individual impacts. Some of our participants shared their experiences of giving up on doctoral study because of lack of support and unmanageable workloads; some described their research being conducted on weekends and holidays—the personal toll of this overwork, combined with a sense of the overwork being unappreciated, are likely to exacerbate the problem of ITE academics feeling trivialised and overlooked in their own institutions and more widely.

6. Recommendations

Our recommendations to the sector and more widely are seemingly obvious but could be effective in dissipating the perfect storm the sector finds itself in. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that teacher education in England will see a period without reforms and policy changes, but there are actions available within the university sector.

University leadership teams and the Department for Education should address the omission, trivialisation, and condemnation of ITE that Spencer (2013) first identified over 10 years ago, which contributes to the perfect storm as a lack of understanding of the sector. Academics working in ITE should be actively sought out to contribute to changes and developments in their sector at the university and national level, particularly if they are research active in the sector. The government in England, and governments internationally, as well as universities, should consult meaningfully with teacher educators when considering any policy change or development (Leahy et al., 2025). University leadership teams should ensure that their teacher education academics are given the same opportunities as other researchers and are encouraged and supported to engage in research and continued professional development, including doctoral study. This is not a simple recommendation, as ITE academic workloads in many institutions mean that research cannot be merely 'bolted on' without reductions in workload elsewhere, with financial costs attached. Avoiding sector wide, disruptive changes would assist with this, as disruptive change magnifies workload. Treating the teacher education sector more widely as an essential service that should have minimal disruption because of its national importance would avoid this in the future.

As a sector, any activities that support colleagues to undertake further study and research should be promoted to dispel the narrative of teacher educators being teachers rather than researchers. As a sector, teacher education will need research champions who can promote the work of researchers in this field to the wider education discipline and policy makers, again to avoid the omission and trivialisation of ITE expertise. Organisations like UCET are promoting research in ITE, and it would be good to see this supported in individual institutions so that academics can engage with opportunities. Even small actions such as making time for academics to discuss research together would make a positive contribution to growing the research culture.

Additionally, organisations that support ITE in England should continue their support for research in ITE. Recent funding calls for ITE-related research projects (such as the BERA small grants award, 2024) may bolster researchers in ITE departments in terms of making space and time for their research work and raise the profile of ITE researchers.

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