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'It felt like a secret ballot': the impact of reaccreditation on academics working in initial teacher education in England, 2022/2023

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ABSTRACT

In 2022, a mandatory accreditation process was enacted across the pre-service teacher education sector in England, the successful navigation of which would be a requirement for institutions to continue offering initial teacher education (ITE) beyond 2024. We surveyed 143 academics working in university-based ITE in 2022/23, using an online survey to capture a range of their experiences of the academic year. In this paper, we focus on the experiences of the re-accreditation process. The results show significant concerns about accreditation within this group, at individual, team, institution and wider levels, including workload, perceptions of ideologically motivated change and existential concerns for the sector. Taking a novel discourse analysis approach to the study data, we conclude that the accreditation process has had a serious and negative impact on ITE academics in 2022/23. Whilst our focus is on one country, which is an outlier in terms of the policy, regulation and accountability of teacher education, there are national governments that have expressed an interest in carrying out their own provider accreditation processes, and this may be of interest to those working in ITE in those countries, and to anyone who has an interest in the future of pre-service teacher education and teacher educators.

Introduction

This paper focuses on those who work in initial teacher education (ITE) and pre-service teacher education in universities in England. This is an under-researched group of people in the UK and internationally, where research tends to focus on pre-service teachers (e.g. Van Katwijk, Jansen, and Van Veen 2023) or on teacher education pedagogy (e.g. Chan, Maneewan, and Koul 2023). We have focused on university based ITE because of the unique position of academics working in this sector. 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), alongside negotiating the bureaucratic systems of 'labyrinthine university administration' (Martinussen 2022, para. 1). It can be argued that ITE academics must negotiate additional bureaucracy due to competing external and internal demands of the Department for Education (DfE), the inspectorate, Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and their own higher education institutions, as well as the needs of their school partnerships (groups of schools working with the university to provide school placements/practicum).

The whole ITE sector in England has been through a significant change, brought about by the DfE's Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Market Review, commissioned in 2021. The stated aims of the review were to ensure that:

> All trainees receive high-quality training. The ITT market maintains the capacity to deliver enough trainees and is accessible to candidates.The ITT system benefits all schools. (Department for Education 2021a)

The review, which was undertaken by a small expert advisory group, went beyond these stated aims and recommended a new whole sector accreditation process for providers.

Our focus is on one country, England, which is an outlier in terms of policy, regulation and accountability of teacher education (Ellis and Childs 2023; Mutton and Burn 2024), as the design, execution and inspection of regulations, criteria and policies sits almost entirely outside of the institutions that deliver it. However, there are other national governments that have expressed interest in carrying out their own provider accreditation processes (for example, in the Middle East and South America, see Dada et al. 2016), and this may be of interest to those working in ITE in those countries, and to anyone who has an interest in the future of pre-service teacher education and teacher educators.

Initial teacher education or training (ITE or ITT)?

Pre-service teacher education and training in England is referred to as 'ITE' and 'ITT'. At the time of writing, the DfE use 'ITT' (Initial Teacher Training); Ofsted use 'ITE' (Initial Teacher Education) and the providers themselves use one or both acronyms in different contexts. Many in the sector argue that a focus on 'education' over 'training' emphasises the complexity and duration of the process of becoming a teacher (Chitty 2009), and for this reason we have chosen to use ITE unless we are quoting other authors and policy documents.

Initial teacher education in England

To teach in England, one does not need to have Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), but most teachers in England do hold QTS, and even in schools where this is not a requirement (academies, free schools and private schools), QTS is still considered a benchmark. To be awarded QTS by the Department for Education, one must be recommended for the award by an accredited ITT provider.

At the time of writing, there are various routes into teaching (Figure 1) and universities are significant providers of teacher education, both in recommendation for QTS, and in academic qualifications across the sector.
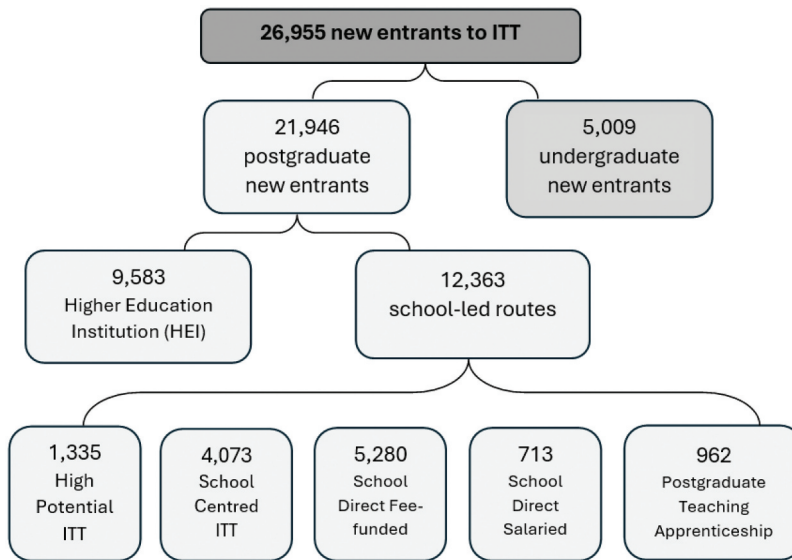
Figure 1. Entrants into ITT in England 2023/24 Department of Education (2023).

Despite increasing regulation and a drive on consistency (often referred to as coherence or fidelity in policy discourse) across ITE provision in recent years to make the sector more popular as a career choice, the overall picture for teacher supply in England is a 'gloomy one' (Education Policy Institute and James Zuccollo 2023, para. 8), and it is becoming harder to recruit teachers, especially in the secondary phase, teaching pupils aged 11 to 18. England is not alone in having significant issues in student teacher recruitment, with an estimated 44 million new teachers required by 2030 across the world, with 15 million of these needed in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO 2024). The current picture is bleak; DfE targets for recruitment of student teachers have only been met once in the UK since 2015/16, with significant discrepancies in meeting targets for many secondary subjects, such as physics (Maisuria et al. 2023). There are concerns that the reaccreditation process for the ITE sector, which was instigated by the Market Review (Department for Education 2021a, 2021b), could have a further detrimental impact.

It is also important to note that 'England now has the most tightly regulated and centrally controlled system of ITE anywhere in the world' (Ellis and Childs 2023, 1). ITE providers must meet the minimum requirements of the DfE's ITT Criteria (Department of Education 2023) and the Core Content Framework (CCF) (2019) a centrally mandated national curriculum for ITE providers. The introduction of an ITE national curriculum is important as it is the latest example of continued policy change and churn in England as the ITE sector has become central to government attempts to reform education as a whole (La Velle et al. 2020).

Research on teacher educators in England (rather than teacher education or student teachers) is scarce, possibly because the bulk of research in ITE is carried out by ITE academics, who focus on their students and settings rather than their own work and experiences. We therefore decided that it was important to try to understand the experiences of those involved in ITE in England through a longitudinal study which

began with an initial survey in 2021/22 (Wood and Quickfall 2024). We do know that for those working in ITE in England, individuals and teams have faced a number of acute demands during the 2022/23 academic year, due to significant policy changes in English teacher education (Wood and Quickfall 2024). Central to these demands have been the associated workloads, created by a sector wide 'market review' and a resultant accreditation process for ITE programmes.

The Market review and accreditation

Organisations and groups involved in ITE responded to the Market Review, both before and after the group reported their recommendations in July 2021. James Noble-Rogers of UCET, the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers, commented thus of the Market Review rationale:

> The consultation paper says that the government's objectives for the content and organisation of ITE programmes can only be delivered if they are accompanied by wholesale market reform. And yet, in a paper that constantly references the importance of evidence, no evidence or justification for this is given. None whatsoever. (Noble-Rogers 2021, para.3)

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Teaching Profession carried out their own survey of stakeholders. Responses to the survey questioned the rationale for the review:

> A concern was expressed that notions of 'quality' and 'consistency' are being confused, and that there is an assumption that a uniform approach to teacher training and early career support would lead to better quality early career teachers. (Knight et al. 2021, 7)

Despite feedback from the sector warning that the plans would damage the sector, the government accepted almost all the recommendations of the Market Review report (Department for Education 2021b). The resultant accreditation process commenced in December 2021 (see Figure 2 timeline) and all providers were required to apply for reaccreditation to provide ITT from the 2024/25 academic year onwards (Department of Education 2022). Whilst the review and subsequent enactment of recommendations has been welcomed by some (e.g. Lock 2021), for many of those working in the ITE sector, the focus seemed to have changed from making ITE easier to access for applicants, as per the stated aims listed above, to a 'weeding out' of providers (Brooks and Perryman 2023, 7).

The official process of accreditation is still ongoing for some providers at the time of writing, as the DfE has re-opened the process for providers who lost accreditation in 2022, to be completed by the summer of 2025 (Department of Education 2025). The number of accredited providers (both university and school based) has been reduced by the 2022 accreditation process, from 240 to 179 (Worth 2023), potentially leading to a loss of 4,000 training places (Zuccollo 2022), although some unaccredited providers have since partnered with accredited institutions (in arrangements akin to subcontracting) to continue delivery of their programmes for 2024/25. The potential loss of 4,000 places every year, in a recruitment crisis that has persisted for over 10 years is bleak for the teaching profession and for the children currently being taught by non-specialists. For example, in 2023, 27% of physics lessons in England were taught by non-specialists (Walker 2023). It is unclear at the current time what the full impact of this process will be on recruitment and the sustainability of the ITE sector beyond 2024/25 Maisuria et al. (2023), as in 2025 some de-
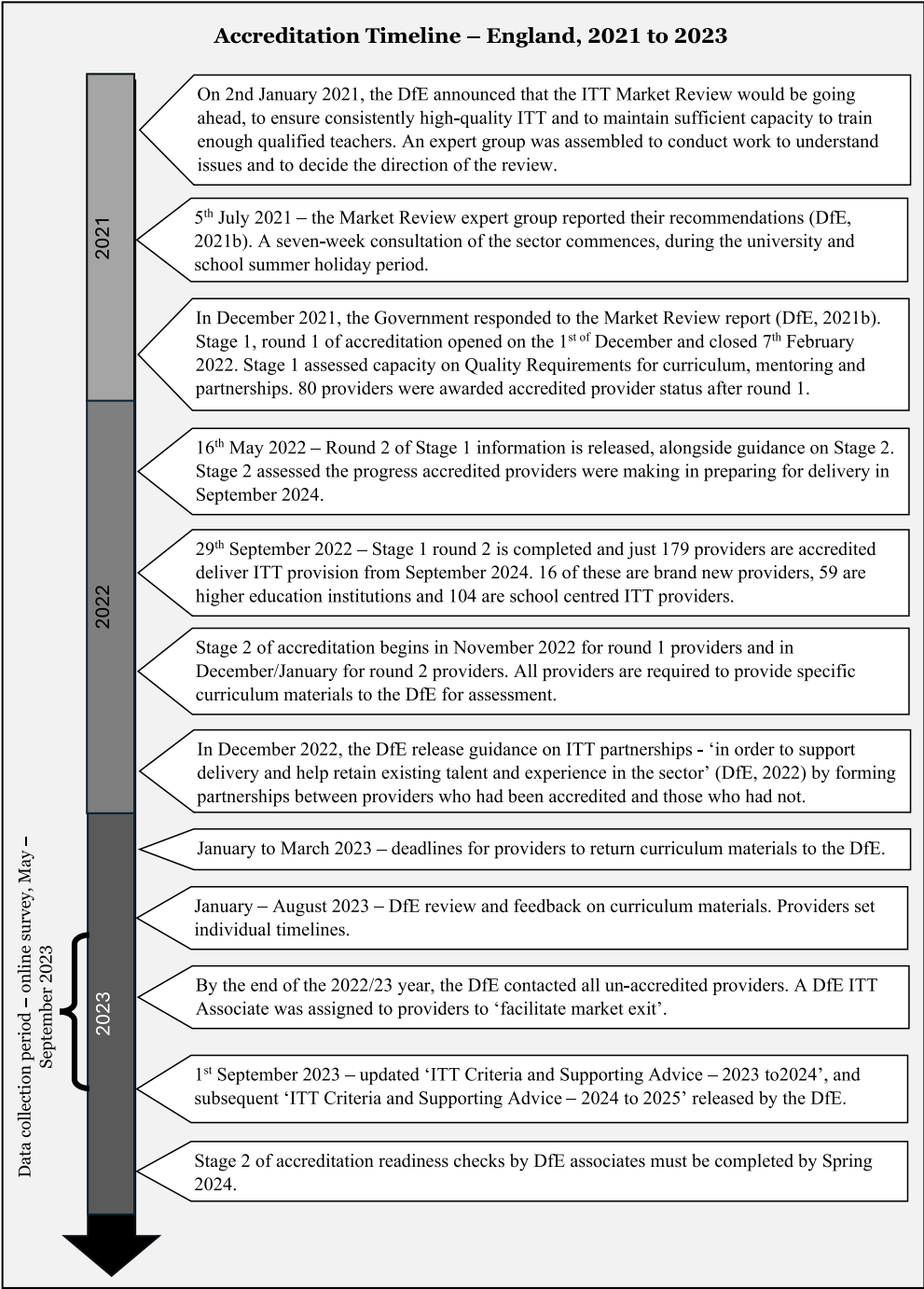
Accreditation Timeline – England, 2021 to 2023

2021

On 2nd January 2021, the DfE announced that the ITT Market Review would be going ahead, to ensure consistently high-quality ITT and to maintain sufficient capacity to train enough qualified teachers. An expert group was assembled to conduct work to understand issues and to decide the direction of the review.

5th July 2021 – the Market Review expert group reported their recommendations (DfE, 2021b). A seven-week consultation of the sector commences, during the university and school summer holiday period.

In December 2021, the Government responded to the Market Review report (DfE, 2021b). Stage 1, round 1 of accreditation opened on the 1st of December and closed 7th February 2022. Stage 1 assessed capacity on Quality Requirements for curriculum, mentoring and partnerships. 80 providers were awarded accredited provider status after round 1.

2022

16th May 2022 – Round 2 of Stage 1 information is released, alongside guidance on Stage 2. Stage 2 assessed the progress accredited providers were making in preparing for delivery in September 2024.

29th September 2022 – Stage 1 round 2 is completed and just 179 providers are accredited deliver ITT provision from September 2024. 16 of these are brand new providers, 59 are higher education institutions and 104 are school centred ITT providers.

Stage 2 of accreditation begins in November 2022 for round 1 providers and in December/January for round 2 providers. All providers are required to provide specific curriculum materials to the DfE for assessment.

In December 2022, the DfE release guidance on ITT partnerships - 'in order to support delivery and help retain existing talent and experience in the sector' (DfE, 2022) by forming partnerships between providers who had been accredited and those who had not.

2023

January to March 2023 – deadlines for providers to return curriculum materials to the DfE.

January – August 2023 – DfE review and feedback on curriculum materials. Providers set individual timelines.

By the end of the 2022/23 year, the DfE contacted all un-accredited providers. A DfE ITT Associate was assigned to providers to 'facilitate market exit'.

1st September 2023 – updated 'ITT Criteria and Supporting Advice – 2023 to2024', and subsequent 'ITT Criteria and Supporting Advice – 2024 to 2025' released by the DfE.

Stage 2 of accreditation readiness checks by DfE associates must be completed by Spring 2024.

Data collection period – online survey, May – September 2023

Figure 2. ITT Market review and accreditation timeline.

accredited providers have engaged in a new reaccreditation process to begin their own programmes again from September 2026.

Materials and methods

The data collected and reported here are from the second year of a five-year longitudinal study (beginning in 2021/22, for further information on the first year, see Wood and Quickfall 2024). The British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (BERA 2018) were followed throughout the study.

We developed a questionnaire, covering a wide range of themes, which was designed to capture the views and reflections of teacher educators based in higher education institutions, specifically concerning:

> The ITE environment (amount of work, role of leaders, relationships) Workload Accreditation and Ofsted Future of work in ITE

In each theme, there was a mix of Likert Scale and open questions to capture subjective views and to give an opportunity to share experiences and insights in more detail. In total, there were 19 Likert response questions and 8 open text response questions. Participants did not have to enter a response in the open text-based answers, and a range of 70 to 90 responses were logged across the open questions.

The questionnaire was accessed online via a link or QR code, and advertised through social media (X, previously known as Twitter), and via professional networks including the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET). The link to the questionnaire was open to participants for 4 months (June to September 2023), and regular adverts were posted on social media and in the UCET newsletter, which is shared with university-based ITE providers.

A total of 143 responses were collected from an estimated sector total of 1281 teacher educators in HEIs, based on Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for the 2020/21 academic year. Hence, the sample constitutes an approximately 11% return from the HE teacher educator population, though given that some teacher educators might be returned in different categories in the HESA returns from each university, this might be a slight over-estimation.

Analysis

Analysis of text-based responses involved use of critical discourse analysis, combined with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner et al. 1988) to create a new model of discourse analysis: ecological systems discourse analysis (ESDA) (Quickfall 2020). This model considers participants' individual worlds, as well as giving opportunities to map shared themes and positions concerning the discourse of ITT accreditation. The model for analysis of this data has two stages; first, the text data were analysed with critical discourse analysis, then, secondly, identified discourses were mapped across an ecological system (see Figure 3).

Critical discourse analysis takes a critical stance to data, examining the discourses at play but also questioning the positioning of the author in relation to that discourse. Critical discourse analysis is helpful in exploring resistance to and
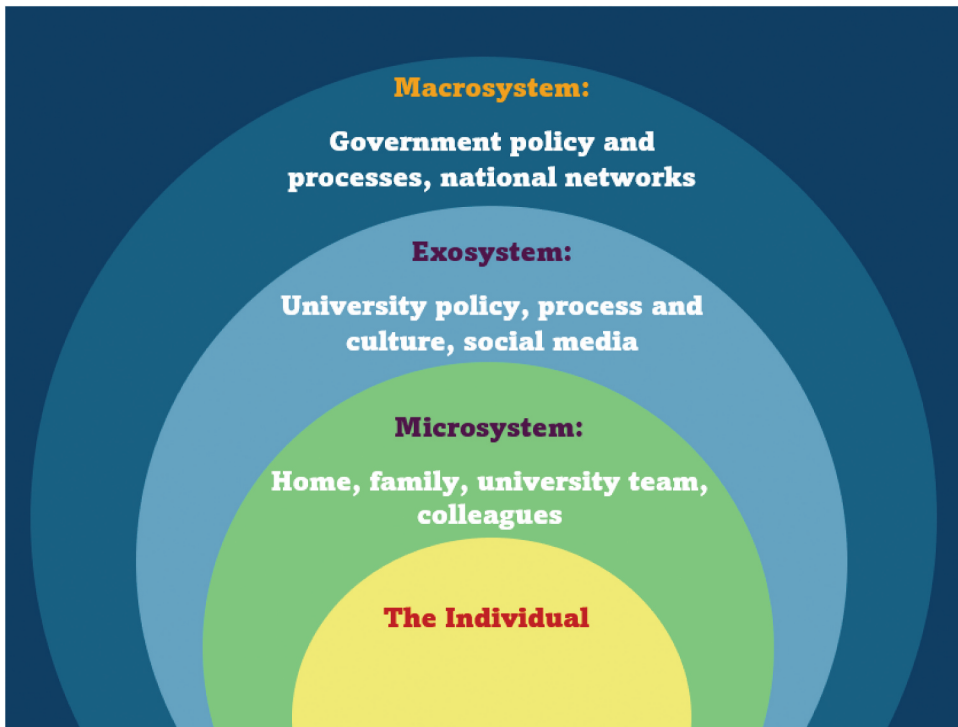
Figure 3. An ecological system of ITT accreditation, centring the individual academic, which was used for analysis of text data (see results section).

acceptance of dominant discourses and can capture views of the social world, as well as uncovering how a situation could be different (Hammersley 2003, 758). Resistance and acceptance here refers to the narrator's position towards or away from the discourse. For example, if we take the discourse of ITE academics having heavy workloads:

Narrator 1: Workload is far too heavy in ITE. I don't understand why other academics go along with it. (resistance to dominant discourse)

Narrator 2: Workload is far too heavy in ITE. But we just end up doing the work because it is for the students. (acceptance of dominant discourse)

In this first stage of our analysis, we followed Fairclough (2000) in exploring the semiotic resources our participants use as they interpret their situation. Fairclough theorised three semiotic resources: genres (ways of interacting); discourses (ways of representing); and style (ways of being). Genres were not appropriate because of the text data we collected which is generally too brief to explore genres. We primarily focused on discourses in this analysis. Discourse refers to the 'clusters of meanings that give rise to macro-narratives or cultural models' (Rogers 2011, 12), in short, shared stories that we tell each other. We also noted style as part of discourse, style or ways of being refers to 'the kinds of identity work that people enact as they are using language' (Rogers 2011, 12), for example, the positioning of resistance or acceptance to the discourse. We explored the positions our

participants took to discourses they shared (Willig 2008) in their comments, where we had sufficient text data to consider comments in this depth.

Once we had identified discourses in participant comments, we applied these to an ecological system based on Bronfenbrenner's model (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner et al. 1988) to create an ESDA map, encompassing all participants' discourses. Creating the system descriptors, such as 'government policy' in the micro-system (see Figure 3), was a process of iteration, we mapped some aspects of the system descriptors in advance of data collection, following Bronfenbrenner's theoretical position-ing of people and processes across systems (such as government policy in the macro-system) but others emerged as they occurred in the data, and we considered carefully whether these were micro, exo or macrosystem discourses. In Bronfenbrenner's original theory, ecological systems are just one quarter of a much larger theory (Bronfenbrenner et al. 1988) and the original ecosystem also contained a mesosystem, where microsystem elements interact, and a chronosystem, relating to the passage of time. We did not use the mesosystem or chronosystem in our analysis, although we were open to this option. Following data collection, we realised that the text responses of participants were brief and did not provide sufficient depth to interrogate the interplay of elements in the microsystem or cover significant discourses around the passing of time in relation to accreditation. The boundaries between systems are to some extent arbitrary, and some discourses straddle systems but mapping discourses this way gives a sense of how an event (such as a policy change) can have an impact across multiple systems and also gives an opportunity to identify systems where there is no impact perceived.

Sample characteristics

The sample gained from the questionnaire showed a return that included responses from across the sector and broadly reflects the main types of institution involved in ITE. There was a spread of ITE experience, and academics in a range of leadership and management roles represented. The majority of participants were 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 ITT academics, as we would expect and reflecting the sector.

Ethics

We followed the BERA (2018) ethical guidelines throughout this project and sought and gained ethical approval from both of our 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.

Results

Results shown here are for the text-based responses that refer to the accreditation process. Where participant quotes do not mention accreditation specifically, these have

been taken from the open question asking for further comments on accreditation (Q32). We have reproduced participant comments exactly as they were submitted, including punctuation. Identifying comments that are focused on accreditation allowed for characterisation of the individual, microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem discourses that have been identified using ecological systems discourse analysis.

Likert scale data

As a simple overview, Likert scale data collected in question 32 offers a general indication of the distribution of participants' views amongst ITE academics and shows a negative response concerning the experience of working on accreditation in 2022/23 (Table 1). Whilst a small number of participants strongly agreed or agreed that accreditation had been a positive experience, two-thirds responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that it had been positive.

Ecological systems discourse analysis

As outlined above, ESDA considers participants' discourses across the realms of their working lives, from the individual, the team (microsystem), the wider university (exosystem) and the national picture in terms of policymakers, learned bodies and the media (macrosystem). Therefore, what follows describes these discourses at different systems levels.

Individual impact

We identified discourses in the text responses where the discursive construction was about the participant themselves, framing themselves in relation to accreditation (Willig 2008). Participants expressed concern, dismay and distress around their experiences of accreditation, and there were no positive comments when looking at individual experiences of accreditation:

> It's very sad, as it was a great job when I first started, but now it's one that nobody really wants anymore. Teaching on a non-QTS course would take a huge amount of stress and workload off my shoulders, but I'm good at what I do; but how long can I keep going?

Many comments echoed this sentiment – that working in ITE was stressful for individuals in 2022/23, particularly because of the workload associated with accreditation, and academics doubt their ability to continue in the current situation. Some academics also commented on a disconnect between their beliefs about what ITE should be, and the direction the DfE are taking the sector in:

Table 1. Distribution of Likert scale responses for question 32.

	Strongly Agree Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree Strongly Disagree
Q32: The DfE accreditation has been a positive experience for me.	3 10	31	29 68

> After 22 years in ITE I am seriously considering my future. This is a very sad inditement of what the DfE/this government has done to the sector, good people are electing to walk away now, I may become one of them.

Some participants described the personal impacts of working in the sector in 2022/23. Whilst we did not ask any questions in the survey about mental health and/or wellbeing, many academics reported issues with their mental health, linked to the current situation in the sector:

> This year has really impressed on to me that staying in ITE will likely be of detriment to my health and happiness and so I'm looking at other options.

> Workload and stress has [sic] caused me to almost take mental health leave and I've had to speak to a mental health advisor, which I've never done before in my life.

Many comments that individuals made about their own circumstances described a mismatch between their beliefs as educators and what their roles currently demand.

> The university is fantastic. The Market Review context and where it is driving us is a nightmare and may drive me out. Increasingly I am being asked to do things which I do not believe in. Additionally, I am being required to do more and more but time to read, plan and reflect is almost non-existent.

> Working on all the reaccreditation stuff has been anything but normal - I'm running a programme whilst feeding the reaccreditation monster at the same time. It's draining.

Others described their own battles, attempting to mark out their work in the face of sweeping prescription across the sector, alongside the workload of preparing for 2024. Again, a disconnect between the beliefs of some academics about what ITE should be, and what it is becoming, is clear in responses:

> I fear that our work as teacher educators is becoming increasingly prescribed and proscribed. I keep on contesting, speaking out and raising concerns/questions, and will continue to do so, but it's quite wearying at times!

Some individuals have already made the decision to leave ITE, often with limited autonomy in their choice due to accreditation:

> It has been an extremely stressful year with the outcomes of ITT accreditation and the impact on my role. As a result of not gaining ITT accreditation, we no longer offer ITE, I am therefore taking voluntary redundancy.

Others note the career-limiting impact of the accreditation process on them, because other aspects of their roles have been sidelined out of necessity:

> I have had no time to develop my academic capital. It has been driven by the urgent needs of ITE that simply do not stop throughout the year. I have had no time for research development.

The impact of extremely high workloads is clear when participants talk about themselves in the sector. The increasing workload of ITE academics was a key factor, with reports of increases in hours worked, but also in the intensity of work:

> Workload is always high in ITE but due to staffing issues it has been much worse this year. Some staff have also had the additional burden of preparing materials for the reaccreditation

process. Planning for ITaPs (intensive training and practice) has also increased workload. I've only managed by working on my days off and weekends despite being paid for 0.6. (of a full-time contract)

Participants in leadership positions in ITE shared their individual struggles with workload during the accreditation process, when many hours of additional work tended to fall on them:

Workload demands have got higher. I struggle in a leadership role to complete everything expected in the four days I work a week. This has increased my stress levels, and I now regularly suffer from insomnia

Microsystem discourses

When identifying microsystem discourses, we analysed responses for discursive constructions around close colleagues, programme teams, family and friends (see Figure 3). Many responses talked about the impact of accreditation on colleagues and academic teams:

We started with the uncertainty of whether we would make it through round 2 of reaccreditation, having failed the first round, much to our surprise and chagrin. We have lost a large number of staff due to institutional uncertainties and had a lot of ill health. These have meant lots of scrambling around to cover colleagues' work and remaining staff overstretched.

The experience of failing the first round of Stage 1 (see timeline, Figure 2) and waiting for the outcome of round 2 is a common response and participants talked about the stress on teams. Some reported that the outcomes of round 2, and the finality of these outcomes, coupled with a lack of comprehension outside of the team made the process frustrating:

Institution lost accreditation. No partnerships were financially viable. Institution to stop ITE. No support from DfE. On the day we were told that we had lost accreditation another part of DfE contacted to tell us that there is a recruitment crisis in our area and an advisor will be in touch soon to help with recruitment.

Workload was tied to accreditation and pressure on teams in many comments, as it was in our analysis of individual concerns:

Workload is an ongoing issue. The added pressure of the accreditation process, the ongoing pressure of a potential Ofsted inspection and pressure to recruit more trainees are all areas that impact on workload, but there seems little acknowledgement that these are above and beyond the day to day supporting of our trainees . . . This means that we have to complete all the tasks set for us by the DfE alongside our current workload.

Concerns about workload were complex; the additional labour involved in re-accreditation, whether successful or not, resulted in impacts on other areas of academic work:

Important research was held up and prevented by reaccreditation. To achieve that took working to 10 pm at weekends and a team of people working excess hours.

Undoubtedly other aspects of work in the sector have either been covered by working beyond contracted hours or have been jettisoned. Unfortunately, many respondents commented on research being postponed, delayed or abandoned in their departments, despite this not being a specific question in the survey.

Exosystem discourses

In the exosystem, we identified discursive positions concerning the university and wider ITE community, reflecting the broader systems that have an impact upon our participant group. One participant shared a positive view of accreditation as providing welcome change, with an exosystem view of university ITE, although this was an outlying view;

> We needed this in ITE. For too long we have been following the paths of progressive educators that last saw the classroom over 15 years ago.

As in the microsystem, the process of being de-accredited was raised, and some participants shared their institutional view of accreditation:

> Our institution was not successful in the DfE's re-accreditation process and partnering with others for the award of QTS was found not to be viable within the university's financial envelope. As a result, the decision was taken to cease delivering QTS programmes, cancelling the 2023 PGCE intake, and capping the (undergraduate programme) at 90 students. This meant that there was a round of redundancies and significant restructuring is ongoing for the teach out of the (undergraduate programme) and potential introduction of alternative programmes without QTS.

The impact reported here is the closure of whole programmes and redundancies for whole teams of academics, with clear current and future impacts for teacher supply in the local partnership and region. Others reported their view of de-accreditation happening to colleagues in other universities:

> We passed (1st window) but have sat in meetings subsequently with colleagues who have openly cried because of the damage done to their institutions and their own career futures because they were rejected.

> … much unrest, worry, survivor guilt about other institutions who were not accredited & weariness at the ridiculous bureaucratic processes that had to be undertaken.

Many participants reported their own institution being successful with accreditation but feeling empathy and anger on behalf of colleagues who had not shared in this success. This empathy in responses applied to universities that had not been accredited, but also school-centred teacher training partners, who often work in partnership with university providers. A major discourse in this system was one of the universities being powerless in the face of government reform to the sector, and a sense of being resigned to a loss of freedoms:

> Reaccreditation is ripping freedom away from ITE educators up and down the land. There's nothing my department or my Uni can do about this, despite being supportive of my team and I.

Other participants shared discourses of existential threat to their universities, this was a major theme in text responses to the survey, and many expressed their concerns about the future of ITE in universities:

> I really worry that my institution will close down in the near future. I enjoy my job and would like to keep doing it but am not sure it will be there for me. I know of several good universities that are closing down their ITE and I think it's going to be very damaging to the profession.

Macrosystem discourses

Macrosystem discourses concerned the wider ITE sector networks and government policy. Many participants made comments about the processes of the Market Review and accreditation from a policy standpoint. Again, there was one positive comment regarding the macrosystem view of accreditation:

> About time. It's a great addition to ensure teacher training is consistent across ITT.

All other participant comments concerning the macrosystem were negative, and this short statement reflects the sentiments of many when considering the national picture:

> This has been a politically motivated attack on HE in ITE.

Many comments related to government ideology, which participants felt was being enacted in the Market Review and accreditation processes:

> The entire process is a farce, and I have no faith in it. It is clear that the government wants to get rid of HE in ITE so it can force its narrow view of 'research' and promote its ideology.

Whilst many participants did not expand on what they meant by government ideology, others explained that they believe the government wished to force universities out of the ITE sector. Comments also reported that the DfE frameworks and criteria for ITE restrict freedoms such as choice of reading and research taught to student teachers, and reinforced the view that particular pedagogies and theories of learning were being proscribed by government. Some strong terms were used, reflecting the strength of feeling about the national reforms:

> It's bollocks, frankly. Ideologically driven, terribly managed, with no idea of impact and lacking a solid evidence foundation.

The experience of accreditation as a government process was variously described in terms such as:

> It felt like a secret ballot.

> We found that many participants used the language of secrecy, obfuscation and deception when talking about the policy landscape. Referring to the process of applying for accreditation, and the suspicion in the sector that this was not a fair process, one participant commented that:

> Too high stakes and no logic or fairness – gaslighting and hidden agendas Again, suspicions are raised about government agendas and the fairness of the process.

Many participants raised concerns about the direction of ITE nationally, following the Market Review and accreditation:

> Since the re accreditation process and increasingly autocratic imposition of the CCF *(Core Content Framework)* I feel the whole tenor of ITE has changed. Senior management is terrified of Ofsted and our academic roles are compromised by a lack of autonomy and criticality. The students are being fed a diet of bland facts and quizzes. I feel very concerned about their critical judgement and ability to question.

The debate around ITE/ITT was also mentioned, describing a direction of government travel:

> Teacher education versus teacher training. Teachers are being de-professionalised, and teaching is being reshaped as a mechanistic process devoid of space for critical engagement with the complexities interactions of curriculum, pedagogy and policy.

Some participants raised concerns at the macrolevel around the creativity and criticality of the teaching profession, given that accreditation has required providers to redesign their programmes to fall in line with a government proscribed framework and approved evidence base:

> We need teachers who think and engage with research. Pupils need teachers who think and are prepared to transform their practice. University ITE is vital as foundation for a teaching career. Government policy is in danger of wrecking it.

Participants who were hopeful about the future of ITE in universities were still critical of the Department for Education:

> I think we will prevail once again, but not because of the DfE, in spite of the DfE.

Some expressed a hope that a change of government may result in a more hopeful macrosystem view for ITE, in anticipation for the general election of 2024 (in which a Labour government prevailed after 14 years of Conservative governments):

I feel the current government are looking to move as much of this into schools as possible, however, with a change in government that is likely in 2024 I feel we may be more secure.

However, overwhelmingly the text responses mirrored the Likert scale data, suggesting that academics in ITE are not hopeful about the future of the sector, their university departments/teams and their own careers.

Discussion

We can only conclude from the responses we have received, that the experience of the accreditation process has been overwhelmingly negative for those academics working in ITE who responded to our questionnaire. Figure 4 shows discourses from participant text responses applied to ecological systems, and here it is clear that discourses are negative, and apply in every system we mapped. However, it is important to recognise that the majority of ITE academics in England did not respond to our survey, and hence we do not seek to claim generalisability. This can be considered a limitation, and we suggest that our data provide insights into how a group of ITE academics responded to accreditation, and a 'fuzzy generalisability' (Bassey and Pratt 2003). There may be reasons why some eligible people did not participate, for example, having no strong feelings to report. Lack of time to partici- pate due to heavy workloads, and the necessity of using annual leave during the summer period when the survey is open, could also limit participation.

From the discourses, our participants shared, the issues with accreditation they per- ceive are not limited to their locality, they are describing what they see as a systemic problem. The discourses at play here suggest that the negative impacts of accreditation are understood as personal, organisational and systemic in nature, and that academics working in ITE are voicing this from their own experiences before the policy has even been enacted through their programmes from September 2024.

Macrosystem:
Mistrust in perceived government intentions, ideologies and
anti-academia discourses, concern for creativity stripping.

Exosystem:
Concern for colleagues, redundancies and cuts in
universities, survivor guilt.

Microsystem:
Workload across teams, staff leaving, research
curtailed.

The Individual:
Workload, health, mental health
and wellbeing, compromise on
beliefs, research curtailed.
Lack of hope in a future in ITE

Figure 4. Ecological systems discourse map for this study.

Academics in ITE are narrating challenges that range from their own mental health, workload for themselves and their teams, and linking these through to government ideology and national policy, which is variously described as unfair, deceptive and secretive. It is clear in the discourses shared by our participants that their view is that accreditation is having a large-scale negative impact on the ITE sector in universities, from lost capacity in the sector, redundancies, survivor guilt through to very personal impacts on physical and mental health. This is leading to mistrust in the government and suspicion about motives and ideologies. In this way, discourses not only develop horizontally but also have vertical coherence between the levels in the ecological system of accreditation.

At an individual level, the discourses we identified from many participants were increased and increasing workload around accreditation, the impact of accreditation on mental health and wellbeing and the effect of accreditation on academic careers, including the inability to complete research. Positioning to these discourses was wholly negative, with most respondents taking a position of acceptance (whilst is in no way a suggestion of satisfaction) to the discourses, as an inevitable part of their work. Some talked about walking away from ITE as their only option for protecting their mental health. There was a general sense that academics were working in ways that were against their own personal beliefs about education and teaching, resulting in a lack of hope in the future of ITE in universities.

At a microsystem level, discourses bled through from the individual, but with wider concern. For example, workload was a common discourse in the microsystem, but here

positioned as impacting on ITE teams and colleagues. Many academics shared experiences of colleagues leaving; either voluntarily or through redundancies following an unsuccessful accreditation attempt, and the negative consequences of this in terms of remaining colleagues absorbing the workload of a bigger team. Research was mentioned again here, the discourse now focused on project teams who were put under increasing pressure by accreditation, which became the priority and pushed research and other scholarly work into evenings and weekends. Again, positioning to these discourses was generally accepting; there is consensus that accreditation is negative for teams and there is a sense that academics have had to adjust to the outcomes of accreditation together. Participants positioned themselves as accepting of the negative discourse.

In the exosystem, participants shared negative discourses about accreditation, including damage to other universities, concern for their own wider institution and survivor guilt. Where we found strong evidence of highly negative positioning was to experiences of colleagues in participant's own and other universities suffering redundancies and course closures. Participants who shared this discourse were almost unanimous in accepting the negative here, and again, the discourses can be seen crossing boundaries of systems, as concern for themselves, their own colleagues and peers in other universities are all positioned as negative, damaging and presenting a lack of hope and opportunity in the sector. Only one participant positioned themself resistant to the negativity, suggesting in their response that accreditation and subsequent events was a welcome change

At the macrosytem level, discourses that had spanned other systems are expanded to take in government intentions and ideology, and the negative impacts on creativity and the teaching profession that ITE academics could foresee on the horizon. The accreditation process was described in terms of subterfuge and manipulation; participants described their suspicion that the DfE's intent is to strip ITE out of universities and this was a common discourse shared. The concerns from the individual through to their institutions are all couched in this discourse, because if academics accept the discourse that the government are determined to shut down their sector, there is no hope for them; programmes will close, creative curricula will be on the scrapheap and their punishing workload will have been for nothing. No students or future teachers will benefit from anything they are doing.

Academics working in ITE provide a vital service to the education sector, ensuring that teachers enter the classroom with the knowledge, skills and confidence to make a difference to the learners they work with. As a group, they prepare 44% of postgraduate entrants to teacher education each year (10,278 in 2022/23), whilst also supporting school-centred training routes with postgraduate qualifications; and they train 100% of undergraduate student teachers (5,790 in 2022/23). It is worrying to consider the number of people working in this vital work who are in fear of losing their jobs, or who have already lost them; who are reporting poor mental health and high levels of stress; and who are signalling major concerns over the future of teacher education and research in their field.

The impact of political decisions means that many of the academics who responded to us described their universities as being powerless to protect them, in the face of massive income loss through de-accreditation, and regulatory and statutory impositions in terms of curriculum, timetable and workloads. We would urge those who have influence in decision-making in the macro and exosystems to pay heed to what the

majority of the participants are voicing in this study. It is still possible to avoid further disruption to the sector and harm to individuals and teams who are educating the teachers of the future, during a 10-year recruitment and retention crisis for the teaching workforce.

We wrote about the experience of being an academic in ITE in 2021/22 (see Wood and Quickfall 2024) and at that time, ITE academics who worked on teams that had not met the requirements at Round 1 of Stage 2 of accreditation, shared their concerns and worries about the future if they were not successful in Round 2. They also shared their hopes that their universities would be successful and would continue to provide teacher education beyond September 2024, despite their concerns about stripping of creativity, increasing workloads and what ideologies may lay behind the Market Review and accreditation process (Wood and Quickfall 2024). What we have seen underpinning the discourses surrounding the 2022/23 experience of accreditation is the erosion of the hope we saw in the year before.

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Ethical approval

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