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School-university partnerships: fragile and fragmented, but still worth fighting for

POSTED ON MARCH 18, 2015

1 COMMENT

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It's no great secret that partnerships between schools and universities are in a state of flux. Historical relationships are being reshaped by the push for a [self-improving school-led system](#) in England in particular, with the rapid expansion of [School Direct](#) giving schools a stronger role in Initial Teacher Education (ITE).

I have led two recent studies designed to track and make sense of these changes. The [first](#) was funded by RCUK and NCCPE and undertaken in partnership with Nottingham and Nottingham Trent universities: it looked at school-university partnerships in the round across the UK, for example including Widening Participation and STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) initiatives. The [second](#) was undertaken with [Dr Chris Brown](#) and funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund and the participating schools. It looked at how four current and emerging Teaching Schools in England are working with their partner universities on initial and continuing education for teachers and on the development of evidence-informed practice and Research and Development.

The literature on school-university partnerships highlights the challenges involved in making such arrangements successful. Differences in language, culture and organisational priorities can be compounded by logistical difficulties, meaning that it can be hard to demonstrate impact. The learning from successful partnerships suggests that key features include: school and university staff having an equal voice; the creation of a 'third space' which is separate from the culture of either institution; strategic leaders who recognise and prioritise external working of this nature; and having shared aims and approaches.

The challenges involved in making such partnerships work appear to be compounded by a disjointed policy framework and reductions in dedicated funding. Yet there are also countervailing forces, such as the growing requirement for universities to focus on impact, and we found many instances in the first study of practitioners and institutions working together to shape positive partnerships.

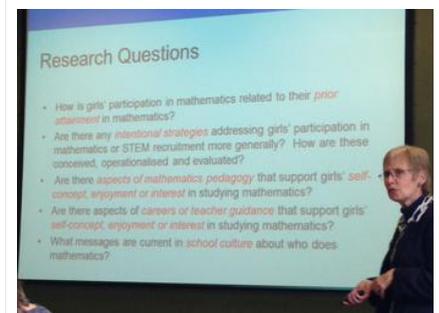
The four existing and emerging Teaching Schools in the second study were at different stages of development, though they faced a similar set of challenges as they worked to build capacity and engagement across their wider alliance schools. They were undertaking an impressive range of activities, although the need to simply 'get work off the ground' often appeared to have limited the scope for genuine innovation in the way that professional learning was designed and undertaken.

When it came to university partners, the four schools saw the quality and credibility of the university staff as key considerations, along with the reputation and prestige of the institution itself. Whether the university was committed to partnership working and its ability to offer expertise, wider networks and a critical friend role were also important.

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These factors were balanced against the inertia that comes from having historical links and relationships. On the plus side these historical relationships can reflect high levels of trust and collaboration, but in some cases there was a sense of dissatisfaction with the quality of the historical university partner tempered by a view that the logistical challenges and emotional effort required to sever the link would be too much to take on. All this was tempered by a set of hard financial considerations, with a view that the need for universities to charge for their work can get in the way of genuine partnership and collaborative working.

Looking ahead it appears that lead schools in England could go in either of two directions:

- One option is that they choose to go it alone, deciding that there is very little that universities can offer that they cannot do themselves, particularly given the tight financial settlement. For example, they might become an accredited provider (SCITT) in their own right. This ambition was expressed by some of the interviewees, although others were highly critical of School Direct and a model of ITE that does not involve universities.
- The other option is that schools look to form much deeper partnerships with one or more university – relationships that could be characterised by long-term shared working and mutual learning in order to support the career development of all staff across an alliance.

How schools respond to this dilemma will depend to a large extent on how leaders in schools and universities choose to work in the coming months and years. Clearly, differential responses are emerging among universities nationally, ranging from complete withdrawal from ITE through to significant investment in partnership models; for example through the sponsorship of academies, opening new University Training Schools and University Technical Colleges, and exploring ways to share ITE roles and funding through School Direct.

The second report includes a number of recommendations for schools and universities that want to foster successful school-university partnerships, including:

- Be clear on what you need and what you can offer: Teaching Schools should expect their university partner to be able to demonstrate how they can align their support for Initial and Continuing Professional Development and R&D so that the different elements complement each other and meet the needs of all staff. Equally, universities must be clear on the benefits of public engagement with practitioners insofar as it can help address wider research and impact priorities. To make this effective universities may need to fund dedicated partnership teams that can work flexibly to align the expertise on offer across the institution.
- Empower leaders to create a 'third space': Prioritise finding the right partner and invest time and effort in making the partnership work. Once a partnership is established, create time and space for staff from each institution to work together to achieve agreed objectives. Effective partnership will take time to develop, but avoid inertia.
- Focus on impact, but be prepared for unexpected outcomes: Review progress regularly and focus on impact whilst acknowledging that some benefits might be hard to measure. Assume that the work you do together could always be better. Focus on learning from effective innovations elsewhere.

The quote below from a Teaching School headteacher provides a powerful vision for the way that school-university partnerships in England could develop. Many forces appear to be standing in the way of its realisation: the landscape does appear fragile and fragmented, yet also in some ways hopeful because, in an increasingly marketised environment, leaders are being forced to choose what they value and want to fight for:

I just think the sort of separation, the level of where the universities have always been perceived and where the schools are has always been too great. ... I would want it to feel that for teachers that they have this lifelong learning link. They have got this institution that is part of their, you know not just professional development for 12 months, it is a permanent part of their professional development while they are within... the Alliance.. I am sure that fundamentally there are all sorts of implications but you get the idea, it feels quite special.

The second study outlined here was commissioned by the IOE's School Partnerships team. To find out about the IOE's partnerships work visit: <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/about/71489.html>

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