

EARLY DAYS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BUCKINGHAM: A PERSONAL VIEW

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In the year 2000 Chris Woodhead stepped down as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools. In the next year Terence Kealey became the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Buckingham, and I resigned as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Bradford. It was the congruence of these three unconnected events which led in 2002 to the formation of the School of Education at the University of Buckingham, which within a decade and a half became the largest provider of teacher training in the country.

For a number of years I had been friends with both Chris and Terence, in Chris's case a very close friend. Terence I had met in the mid-1980s in conservative think-tank circles, when he, a Cambridge bio-chemist, had become a leading advocate of independent education for all, and also the author of a striking essay arguing against the state funding of science (called 'Science Fiction', Centre for Policy Studies, 1989) and published at a time when there were noisy campaigns to 'save' British science, or at least its funding by central government. This did not endear him to the scientific establishment. I was also beginning to publish somewhat polemical articles in national newspapers on education and other topics.

Chris and I originally met in 1989, when we were both on the government's advisory body on teacher training (the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education), Chris as the representative of the National Curriculum Council, where he was deputy chief executive, and I as the author of a pamphlet called 'Who Teaches the Teachers' (Social Affairs Unit, 1988), which questioned the desirability of university based teacher training as opposed to a school centered approach. The pamphlet attracted the attention of Kenneth Clarke, then Secretary of State for Education, who, provocatively it seemed to some, and egged on by Tessa Keswick, his special advisor, put me on CATE, as the body was known.

Chris and I found that we agreed on teacher training and on many other things to do with education and culture more generally, and I also worked with him on SCAA, the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, he as its first chief executive and I as a board member (1993–7). He became Chief Inspector and head of Ofsted in 1994. We kept in close touch, and I also had a period as a board member of the Teacher Training Agency, the successor body to CATE, though, with the change of government, this and my membership of SCAA came to an end

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in 1997. Chris, meanwhile soldiered on at Ofsted in characteristically forthright style, advocating high standards in schools, criticizing poor and mediocre schools and teachers, and encouraging strong and traditional teaching and subject knowledge in both teachers and pupils. At the same time he cast doubt on the value of a strictly academic education for all and on the value of child-centered education for any. He was implacably opposed what he termed the blob, the educational establishment dominant in educational bureaucracies, including the civil service and local authorities, in university departments of education and in the higher echelons of the teaching profession. Needless to say this provoked much hostility and several campaigns against him, and he resigned in 2000.

It was in the autumn of 2001 that I saw that Terence had been appointed Vice-Chancellor of Buckingham. I contacted him to see if I might do something there once I had left Bradford. I also said to him that it was quite normal for Chief Inspectors of Schools to be given Chairs of Education on their retirement, but oddly (?) no such offer had come Chris's way, though he did have a column in the *Sunday Times*. Terence was intrigued, and I set up a meeting for the three of us, which took place in l'Estaminet, a restaurant in Covent Garden favoured by Chris. Terence then set about establishing an education department at Buckingham, with professorial posts for Chris and me (though not wanting to exceed my professional competence I insisted on being Professor of Philosophy, rather than of Education). Perhaps more important, Terence got funding for each of us for four years, from the foundations run by Stanley Kalms and Guy Weston, to enable us to set the department up.

Having been appointed to start a department of education, we then had to find something to do. We were already thinking along the lines of a genuinely independent course of teacher training, which would be school-based, avoiding university courses based on progressive, child-centered and leftist ideological dogma, and even more constrained by the government standards for new teachers, at that time embodied in a booklet of 96 pages with 33 standards, many sub-standards and pages of what was somewhat disingenuously called 'guidance', all of which government accredited courses and teachers had to satisfy. Luckily for us, Geoff Lucas, who had worked for Chris at SCAA, was then secretary of HMC, the professional body for Heads of independent schools. Working through Geoff we had a meeting with the HMC sub-committee concerned with teacher training and development. We found that that committee was very much of our way of thinking, very opposed to the bureaucratic methods of the government's system and even more to its apparent hostility to what it saw as elitism, that is, traditional rigour in teaching, assessment and and subject content. At that time practically all teacher training was based in university departments of education with school placements for teaching practice as a rather secondary aspect. We

were proposing a genuinely independent and employment based course. Schools which wanted to participate would send new teachers they had appointed to work in their schools for a year within a framework set by Buckingham rather than by the blob. Employment in a good school was to be a pre-requisite, which underlined the sense in which the course would involve genuine partnerships with schools. This course would be tailored to the needs specifically of individual independent schools and should be trialled as soon as possible.

It quickly emerged that institutionally at Buckingham the best way of doing this was to set up a postgraduate certificate in education. Our PGCE, as it inevitably became, was to be based on the assumption that what was needed in a teacher was, first, good subject knowledge at whatever level was appropriate. Secondly, subject knowledge, while necessary, was not sufficient; teachers must be able to practice the craft of the classroom. And thirdly teachers must have good moral standing and be able to relate positively to the young people they would be teaching.

Putting the subject knowledge requirement first was designed to counter the widely held belief that teachers were primarily facilitators rather than teachers. It also gave the lie to the sentimentalism that teachers teach children not subjects. Of course they teach children, but their authority and their role stem from their expertise in some worthwhile field of activity, their subject in other words; teachers are primarily teachers, not social workers or child minders, even though there may be some overlap in these areas.

But teaching is not simply a matter of the teacher having learning or expertise. A teacher must also be able to transmit what he or she knows to the young people to be taught, and ideally to enthuse them with what he or she knows and values. Hence, the second requirement, the craft of the classroom. In our view this is largely a practical matter, one which requires the ability to put a subject over and to interact with pupils in classrooms individually and collectively. Hence craft. One could know all there is to know theoretically about managing behaviour or about child psychology and still be a poor teacher. All too often university courses in education were dominated by academically abstract lectures and seminars, often of questionable validity and often promoting a child-centered and ideologically skewed view of education.

Even if the prescriptions one found in fashionable books were sensible, which is occasionally the case, their sense usually arises from the fact that they are basically common sense, dressed up in jargon. But to be told that one should, let us say, cultivate a 'growth mind set' (i.e. seek to transcend one's perceived limitations, accept failure and move on from it, take criticism positively, etc.) does not actually tell one how to behave in an actual and unique (always unique) situation. Then the whole trick is to know how to apply the nostrums in practice, here and now, when actually faced with difficulty, and often with little time to think. By definition this

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transition from theory to action, from the words on the page to the life before one, cannot be in the book, at which point the difficulties begin and may be insoluble even to someone who has worked long and diligently at the theory, and has read everything that there is to read about resilience, well-being or behaviour management, for example. If the knowledge in the theories is useful at all to a teacher (and my feeling is that all too often even an apparently sensible theory is just a matter of words, words, words), its usefulness must manifest itself in practice. In the view of Chris and me, which has its roots in Aristotle and was embodied in our PGCE, the best way of acquiring a practice, here the practice of teaching, is to practice it, under the guidance of an experienced practitioner.

So, while, as will become clear, we did plan some residential meetings in the university for our trainees, the bulk of their training would consist in actually teaching under the guidance of mentors in their schools, and of tutors sent from Buckingham. A further advantage of firmly practical training in the school where the trainee is teaching is that it can be adapted to the level and age at which the trainee is teaching, and also to the style of teaching in the school and fitted to the trainee's personality. Not every successful teacher teaches in the same way; while some very basic principles of teaching are universal, different schools, different pupils and different teachers will work well in different ways, according to the circumstances of the school, the nature of the subject, and the pupils involved, to say nothing of what the individual teacher and his or her personality can bring to the work. Nor in any case does anyone have a monopoly of wisdom in what makes good teaching (or anything else come to that), not even the Secretary of State for Education. If different methods work in different schools for different pupils and at different stages, who has any justification for insisting that all work to the same pattern?

The third desideratum, moral probity and the ability to relate in proper ways to children and young people, is not something that can be described or assessed in abstract or ticked off against a list of bullet points. But it is something that will make itself apparent as the trainee works in a school and in classrooms over the year of the PGCE. The trainee actually being a full member of a school community, and not parachuted in from an academic base for a few weeks on a school 'placement', was thus a crucial aspect of our thinking in devising the Buckingham PGCE. The trainee's mentor and other senior staff in the school would be well placed to comment on the indefinable contribution a trainee makes to the school community in the broadest sense, because the trainee is already part of that community and, unlike those on university organized placements, taking part in every aspect of the life of that community, such as dealing with other staff and parents and taking part in extra-curricular activities.

With our background thinking of teacher training in mind, I can now describe the course programme as we set it up. The course's duration would be a full school

year, from September of one year, when the autumn term begins, to June or July of the next year, the end of the summer term. Before the September starting point the school which wished to place a teacher on the course would apply to Buckingham on behalf of the trainee, and agree to the various course requirements, including providing a mentor (often the relevant head of department or other senior teacher), allowing for weekly meetings between mentor and trainee and agreeing to release the trainee for the Buckingham residentials. The school would also agree to pay the university the fee for the course (even if this was sometimes in part re-couped from the teacher's salary). At Buckingham we would scrutinise the application and, among other things, assure ourselves that the trainee had a decent degree and relevant subject knowledge and that the school was of sufficient quality to carry out the training programme. It is worth noting two caveats here: while normally the trainee's degree would be in the subject(s) he or she is teaching, we were prepared to be flexible on the actual degree if we were satisfied that the trainee had the knowledge and competence for the subject being taught, even if it wasn't on the face of their degree; and while a weekly mentor-trainee meeting would be the norm, some of our trainees were already teachers with several years' experience, in which case some flexibility would be allowed on this.

Each term a tutor from Buckingham would visit the school, primarily to observe lessons and assess the trainee, but also, and importantly, to check that the trainee was being mentored properly, with regular observations of his or her own lessons, constructive meetings with the mentor, and the opportunity him or herself to observe other lessons to widen experience. The school mentor and the Buckingham tutor would write a report each term on the trainee against a set of eleven simple standards, the final one being a joint report by both, leading to a judgement on the trainee's quality, originally simply whether he or she met the standards or not. These standards – a few sentences each – covered such key classroom matters as expectations in teaching, subject knowledge, lesson planning and delivery, assessment, behaviour management and pupil progress, and also one relating to the trainee's collegiality and overall contribution to the life of the school. During the year, the trainee would keep a folder in which evidence would be filed. This evidence would include such things as lesson observations, lesson plans, his or her own assessments of pupils, details of dealings with pupils and parents and of other activities in and for the school, and so on. This folder would be looked at regularly by both mentor and tutor.

There were, as already said, three residential meetings of three days each at Buckingham, one each term. At them there were lectures and discussions of the aims of education as mediated through important thinkers such as Plato, St Augustine, Locke, Rousseau, Dewey, Newman and Arnold, and their more modern followers and critics. There were sessions on the political and historical

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context of education, and on practical matters, such as the nature of the school, behaviour management, lesson planning and delivery, special needs, and English as a foreign language, as well as separate meetings on specific subjects. Speakers at these meetings, apart from Chris and me, included figures of the calibre of Eric Anderson, Martin Stephen, Nick Gibb, Peter Norris (head of music at the Menuhin School), John Venning (head of English at St Paul's), and John McIntosh (head of the London Oratory School). Backing up the residential sessions, each term trainees would write an essay, of university standard and suitably academic, the first on the aims of education, the second on teaching their own subject, and the third a reflection on how the trainee had developed professionally over the year of training. To be awarded the PGCE – which most were – trainees had to fulfil the teaching standards and get at least a pass in each of these essays.

The Independent PGCE course was planned and ratified by the Buckingham senate in the first half of 2002, in what in retrospect was an amazingly smooth and stress-free process. (At that time Buckingham was not hamstrung by the requirements of the misleadingly entitled Quality Assurance Agency, another instance of the blob being given massive power and influence by central government.) We advertised the course in the early summer, and 13 trainees started the course in September 2002. Of these all but one were from senior schools, and four were from Stowe, Buckingham's local public school, with which the university has a good relationship. We had not originally thought to include teachers from primary and prep schools, but our thirteenth – a music teacher and baroque violinist from a prep in Norfolk – convinced us that we should do this.

At the start of the course we had a meeting for the school mentors at Buckingham, at which I, as the somewhat bashful Head of Department, tried to explain what was needed for trainees to do the course and meet the standards. As some of the mentors were senior teachers with far more knowledge of what went on in schools than me, this could be awkward for me. Exactly how many lesson plans did trainees need to produce each term? Should every aspect of a lesson be reported on in a lesson observation? Did all lessons have to conform to the then fashionable famous or notorious tripartite structure, with an exciting starter of dubious relevance to main content? Etc., etc. My personal feeling, strongly felt, if not explicitly expressed, was that you are professionals, you should know what to do on such matters, how much is required, how to balance the thing against the trainee's personal experience, ability and need; I certainly tried to suggest that there were no fixed rules on any of this, and that within broad limits what should be done would depend on the circumstances. What is enough for one trainee might not be enough for another, some trainees might need more attention in certain areas than others, teachers who were already quite experienced would should be treated differently from absolute beginners (and there were always a few of them

to balance those in their first year), and so on. What might have seemed vagueness on my part (and sometimes actually was vagueness) didn't always go down well, but we all learned by experience in what was a new venture. After a while I got better at handling these meetings, or more confident anyway – and the mentors on the whole were supportive and sometimes gave helpful suggestions and advice, which led to finessing the programme. After all the course was (and is) a partnership between the university and the participating schools.

Chris and I did some of the tutoring on behalf of the university, but other tutors were found for specific subjects we were not so confident in, such as art, music, maths and the sciences. In the early days of the course John McIntosh was particularly helpful, not only tutoring maths himself, but also lending us two of his senior science teachers to work for us. For the second year of the PGCE we got a request from King's School in Madrid to take on a couple of trainees, and after some heart-searching and financial research, we agreed to take them on in the same way as home trainees. This aspect of the course has grown over the years, as has the Independent course itself. For some schools and some trainees its very independence (from government regulation and from Ofsted inspection), combined with necessary rigour and a university qualification, has been part of its attraction. In a way this is hardly surprising, as very few teachers in independent schools ever go on to teach in state schools, so for them there seems little point in having the government's qualified teacher status (QTS), which is valuable mainly or even entirely because it allows its holder to teach in maintained (state) schools. What is and was even more surprising is that many heads of independent schools do not see things in that way, which may make some wonder how they see their independence.

In 2003, in our second year of existence, and after the completion of our first course, we were invited to to Dublin, where the HMC conference was taking place that year, to publicise the course. A group of 30 or 40 heads came to hear what I had to say, and the response to the programme and its rationale was very positive, except for one thing. Many of those there said that they would be keen to send teachers of theirs on the course, but they would not, because it did not give QTS. This was rather different from what we had heard from the earlier sub-committee, and caused Chris, Terence and me some soul-searching. However, we did not want to appear inflexible, so we eventually decided (by two votes to one) to seek QTS.

This is not the place to go into the detail of the process, save to say that it took the best part of 18 months, and a great deal of time and effort on our part. Interestingly at the first meeting organized by the Training and Development Agency for schools (the TDA, the successor body to the TTA) for 'potential new providers', as we were called, there were around 50 institutions represented. I think that no more than half a dozen were in the end successful, and, if this is so,

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it is hardly surprising. The process was bureaucratic, prescriptive and inflexible, seemingly (to me anyway) almost designed to put people off. It involved endless meetings both with TDA officials and with Ofsted inspectors. One lot was monitoring and the other supporting (or was it guiding?). I can't remember which was which, maybe because there seemed little difference between the two. Different people came to different meetings, and were not always in agreement with each other. Sometimes the people who turned up showed little awareness of what had been said earlier or even of the documents we had tabled. We made some progress over the months, but still did not satisfy the TDA, and a crunch meeting was called at their headquarters in mid 2004. What apparently was missing from our course, which focused on subject knowledge and the craft of the classroom, seen in largely practical terms, was something the TDA official called 'pedagogical knowledge'. To Chris's horror (he could be diplomatic at times) I insisted that, while I understood subject knowledge and the practice of pedagogy, I had not the faintest idea of what he meant by pedagogical knowledge as a discrete category of what was apparently a body of propositional knowledge, somehow distinct from the other two. His answer I found unhelpful -he had clearly not understood Aristotle on practical wisdom or Gilbert Ryle on knowing how, and TDA HQ was hardly the place to enlighten him. The situation was, I think, finally resolved only by Terence having a word with someone close to government. (Not all New Labour grandees were enamoured of the blob.) Anyway, be that as it may, we were finally accredited to award QTS at Buckingham University, and our first QTS trainees were admitted in 2005.

So now we were running two, somewhat separate PGCE courses, one with QTS and the other without. The QTS course differed from the Independent one in two important respects. The standards QTS trainees were being assessed against were the 33 government ones and not our simple 11, and the QTS also involved trainees having a placement in a second school, which had to be a maintained one. As regards the QTS standards, for the first mentor meeting I arranged a two day meeting in a decent local hotel, as I thought it would take us a long time to cover everything. In fact the meeting was very positive, and we had very little more to say by the end of the second morning. We broke up early to give our attention to a more important matter (the final Ashes test of 2005).

The second school placement I have come to think is actually a good aspect of the QTS programme. Initially I worried that it might be hard to find schools willing to let teachers from independent schools into their schools, but in practice this did not prove much of a problem. Enough schools on both sides of the divide seemed keen to cross the boundary, and without any financial reward. Many of the maintained school teachers involved were very helpful to our trainees, and some clearly liked having our trainees, keen and highly qualified as they often were,

around their departments, especially if they themselves were working in minority subjects, such as classics. And even if the experience was tough, our trainees certainly benefitted from it professionally and personally. (Perhaps this is the point at which I should stress that over the years I gained immense respect for most of our trainees. They were usually extremely well qualified, some with doctorates in their subject, and almost without exception hard-working, dedicated, conscientious, willing to learn and highly idealistic.)

A further complication brought about by the QTS course was the spectre of Ofsted lurking in the background, because courses awarding QTS were and are subject to Ofsted inspections. During my time running the department, until 2010, we had two inspections, the first in the second year of our existence. For this we were ranked 'satisfactory', that is we were judged to have met the governmental requirements, or more precisely, as it was pedantically put, we had not been found to have broken any (there is nothing like the bureaucratic caution so ingrained in the mentality of the blob). We would keep our accreditation, but 'satisfactory' is a bare minimum (and now is not even that, having been changed to 'requires improvement'). This 'satisfactory' grading annoyed Chris and me, because the reason we were not ranked good was because our trainees had apparently not shown enough progress during their PGCE year. We felt that this was unfair and, even if it were not, that Ofsted, despite their normal obsessing with 'evidence', did not have the evidence they would have needed to make this judgement, as they had not seen the trainees at the start of the course. We appealed, and some small revisions were made to the report, though not the overall grading. Still, we were satisfactory and could go on. None of the schools who used us subsequently – and their numbers grew fast on the QTS course – seemed in the least bit worried about Ofsted's 'satisfactory'. The second inspection in which I was involved was in 2009, and we were ranked 'good'. We had a sympathetic lead inspector, who said that he knew that we were a different type of course from the norm, but that he was interested in what we were doing, and would judge us on what he saw, which I think he did.

Before concluding this survey of the early years of the Buckingham department of education, it should be stressed that a guiding principle of both PGCEs was that, the essays aside, the trainees would not be made to do much more than they would be doing as a matter of course in the early years of their career. The point of the course was to ensure and assess their competence in what they were called on to do, and not to produce otiose commentaries on what they were doing and massive files of dubious relevance and value. In many cases they would have had mentors in place in their schools even if they had not been on the course, and almost always they would have been observed and guided by senior teachers. In a way what we were doing was to make more systematic what was already good

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practice in good schools, and certifying what was done. We wanted to avoid all unnecessary bureaucracy and the irrelevant collection of pointless ‘evidence’ with which many teachers in training (and their mentors) were and are burdened. We also wanted the course to mesh seamlessly with the work being done in the school where the trainee was being employed.

One further very important point should be made. For the Independent PGCE we could take anyone we wanted on the course, with no restrictions on numbers. Most QTS courses at the time were state funded, and the Department for Education would centrally allot to teacher training institutions the numbers of trainees they were allowed overall, and also the numbers they were allowed in specific subjects, according to some mysterious process of ‘manpower’ planning in the DfE. We, as a non-state-funded institution, were under no such restriction, and could take as many trainees as we liked in whatever subjects. The schools in which the trainees worked paid the university, not the state. This independence would have been lost had we started taking state money for the training, so I always refused any money for that from central government. Freedom or death was (and is) my view, and I made sure that this freedom was not compromised when the government, through the TDA, and despite my protests, insisted on paying us a small fee for assessing our trainees for QTS.

So, by 2005 we had two PGCE courses running in parallel. They shared the residential meetings, and many of our tutors worked on both. Numbers on both grew slowly but steadily, more on the QTS course than on the Independent. The latter benefited from Chris’s chairmanship of Cognita, from whose schools groups of trainees came regularly, and also from our international reach, which included countries as far away as China, Thailand and Russia, as well as places closer to our European home.

In the summer of 2010 I took a term away from Buckingham - my first since 2002. It was as a research fellow at Bowling Green State University, in rural Ohio, where I wrote an article on education and began what eventually became a book on religion and philosophy (*Transcendence, Creation and Incarnation*, Routledge, 2020). The article (‘Liberal Education: Where Could and Should It Be?’) drew on my experiences and teaching at Buckingham and part of it was published under the title ‘Education and the Modern State’ in the journal *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 29.1, Winter 2012, pp 322–35.

However, when I was in the States, I stepped down as head of the education department. I was replaced by Peter Ireland, who had recently established the M.A. in Educational Leadership in the department. Other new appointments were made, and new chapters in the department’s development began. Over the subsequent decade new courses were added to the menu, and changes were made to the PGCEs, though without changing their basic structure. And the department,

from its small and uncertain beginnings, became the largest provider of teacher training in the country.

Before concluding this account of the early history of the department, a footnote should be added, because it brings one aspect of the early history to a surprising and satisfactory conclusion. In 2011 Nick Gibb, who was now minister for schools (or was it Michael Gove, then the Secretary of State for Education?), asked John McIntosh and me to serve on a large committee to re-write the teacher standards. We also went on the much smaller drafting sub-committee, where, it is fair to say, we played a significant role. After several months of meetings and intensive work, we produced a short and succinct document – two and a half pages – containing 8 straightforward and well focused standards, to replace the earlier 96 pages and 33 standards. Surprisingly enough the 8 new government standards, which emerged after months of sometimes fractious controversy, argument and drafting can easily be seen as a slight re-packaging of the 11 Buckingham standards Chris and I had drafted one afternoon in a couple of hours after lunch back in 2002. John and I also insisted in the preamble to the new standards that the 8 standards were not to be subdivided into sub-standards and judged in an atomistic, bullet-point way. (Needless to say, despite our heart-felt caveat, this is precisely how many trainers and government agencies themselves are now treating our 8 simple standards; but this is not the place for further comment on the cast of mind which is unable to operate in any other way.)

For those interested in the history of this, more important perhaps than what is in the new QTS standards is what is not in them. Thus, for example, there is no mention of ‘independent learning’, which in educational circles is often code for child-centered learning, nor is there anything about teachers facilitating or talk of pupils ‘constructing their own knowledge’ (a dreadful and philosophically illiterate solecism). In our standards, teachers teach, pupils learn and subject knowledge is seen as central.

One further point about the new standards is also worth mentioning. We were required to include a statement about ‘fundamental British values’ in a section on the general responsibilities of teachers. What was handed down to us from the then current ‘Prevent’ agenda said that we were supposed to have mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. I jibbed at this: there were beliefs and faiths that should not be tolerated, let alone respected, so I inserted the words ‘those of’ between ‘different’ and ‘faiths’, a small but I thought significant difference, which is now in the standards, but has not generally been noticed or recognized. It should be, and so should my redrafting of the DfE regulations for teacher training, which I did at the behest of Nick Gibb in 2012. Anyone who wants to know what these actually mean is free to consult me at any time!

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To end this footnote on the new standards, because they were pretty much a re-drafting of the original Buckingham standards, the governmental 8 are now what is required in the Independent PGCE. QTS and Independence are here, at least, aligned, with slight movement from the one side and a considerable shift from the other.