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To cite this article: Linda la Velle, Andrew Clapham, Katie Lonsdale & Ruth Richards (12 Aug 2025): Redefining the (academic) author: investigating the Research Excellence Framework and teacher education research, Journal of Education for Teaching, DOI: [10.1080/02607476.2025.2546372](https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2025.2546372)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2025.2546372>



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Published online: 12 Aug 2025.



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Redefining the (academic) author: investigating the Research Excellence Framework and teacher education research

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ABSTRACT

This short communication presents the preliminary outcomes of an ongoing project exploring how initial teacher education research features in the UK's 5–7 yearly national research assessment exercise, Research Excellence Framework (REF). Most recently, REF has reported in 2014 and 2021. Using a novel sampling method and analytic approach, we found that for REF2014, just 5.5% of outputs submitted by our sample of higher education institutions (HEIs) had a focus on initial teacher education (pre-service). A similar analysis of the same sample of HEIs for the REF2021 showed that, at 5.7%, this proportion was virtually unchanged. The consequences of this for a research-informed profession are discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 April 2025

Accepted 24 July 2025

KEYWORDS

Research Excellence Framework (REF); initial teacher education (ITE); teacher education research

Introduction

That learning to teach should be underpinned by research-informed practice has long been, at least from a rhetorical viewpoint, a governmental policy ambition in the United Kingdom (UK). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK are subject to a high stakes exercise to assess the quality of their research every 5–7 years. This is known as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the outcome of which is directly related to the amount of central funding granted to HEIs. Most recently, the REF has been held for the periods 2008–2013, and 2024–2020, reporting in 2014 and 2021, respectively. Academic disciplines are organised into separate units of assessment (UoA), of which Education is one. Academics working in university Education departments that offer Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes do so in a situation of competing tensions of accountability for their separate performances as teacher educators and educational researchers. It was in this context that the question was raised of the extent and quality of research specifically into and on initial teacher education as it was represented in the REF. This article is not concerned with any other element of the REF Education UoA.

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Table 1. Output categorisation.

Green	Research related specifically to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England
Yellow	Research that is not ITE specific, but related to teaching and learning in English schools
Amber	Research that is not ITE specific, but related to professional learning in England
Blue	Research related to ITE but not in England
Red	Research that is not related to ITE, not related to teaching in English schools, or were historical documents

Theoretical framework

The lack of ITE research being returned to REF highlights how the exercise acts as a powerful discourse and editor-gatekeeper. Drawing on Foucault's work on the 'author function', we suggest that the ITE author is not simply a person, but a function of REF as editor-gatekeeper and discourse. These discourses are evident in the pressure on academics to publish high-quality work, while balancing the challenges of being a teacher educator. As discourse and editor-gatekeeper, REF's aims to enhance research quality and impact impose significant demands on researchers (across every UoA), affecting their publication strategies, resource management, and career development. We argue that key discourses embedded within REF as an editor-gatekeeper have significant implications for teacher educators' practices, as both academics and researchers.

Methodology

Prior to REF2021 results being made public, an analysis of REF2014 results was undertaken in relation to the number of outputs (journal articles, book chapters, etc.) that had a focus on initial teacher education (Clapham et al. 2023). For REF2021, our novel methodology employed a semiotic analysis of REF as discourse and editor-gatekeeper, in conjunction with statistical analysis. Here, we discuss the latter as the preliminary findings of a more detailed analysis and discussion.

We identified a sample of 12 representative HEIs that both provided ITE programmes and returned outputs to REF2014. We scrutinised the outputs in the Education UoA submissions of these HEI and categorised them as shown in Table 1. Each output from the Education submission to REF of the 12 sampled HEIs was categorised as follows:

Analysis of 1,600+ outputs suggested that only 5.5% of these were focused on ITE in the REF2014, which covered the period 2008–2013, as is shown in Table 2 below.

Despite continuing policy churn (la Velle 2021, 2023; la Velle et al. 2020) in relation to initial teacher education – roil that caused many HEIs to discontinue offering accredited ITE programmes – the 12 HEIs that constituted our analysis of the REF2014, continued to do so. All but one of these also submitted outputs to the education UoA in REF2021. Using

Table 2. Proportion of outputs by category for the REF2014.

Green	Yellow	Amber	Red	Blue	Total
45	100	250	418	8	821
5.47%	12.15%	30.38%	50.79%	0.97%	

Table 3. Proportion of outputs by category in the REF2021. NB in the 2021 analysis no ‘blue’ outputs were identified.

Total	Green	Yellow	Amber	Red
642	37	111	136	358
	5.76%	17.29%	21.18%	55.76%

the same output categorisation (Table 1), we analysed the outputs of the 11 HEIs’ Education submissions to REF2021. The results are shown in Table 3.

Comparison of the two REF cycles in relation to the Education submissions from the sampled HEIs shows the following trends:

- A drop in the total number of outputs submitted
- The highest category of submitted Education outputs related to wider fields of enquiry that were not focussed on ITE or teaching in schools in England.
- Similar trends across the two cycles are seen for the categories related to research in and on schools and teaching.
- The proportion of outputs related to ITE showed virtually no change across the two REF cycles.

Discussion

This rapid communication article is concerned only with the final finding, which is significant in that despite an increased emphasis on impact and the inclusion of practice-based research in REF2021, the proportion of research into and on the initial training and education of teachers *per se* remains very low. Reasons for this, i.e. the duality of teacher educators’ roles as teacher/supervisor and researcher; their heavy workloads and increasing accountability remain essentially unchanged. Furthermore, the main questions around the consequences of this, posed by Clapham et al. (2023), all remain unanswered:

- do HEIs with a larger cohort of ITE candidates produce fewer research outputs than those with a smaller cohort?
- are teacher educators producing research in areas other than ITE?
- what is the research/teaching workload balance/contractual conditions of teacher educators who have articles submitted to REF?

At the current stage of data analysis, we do not yet know whether the researchers publishing the REF outputs are working initial teacher educators. If they are, this will have important consequences for the provenance of their work and its potential impact on ITE curriculum development, practice and policy. If they are not, weight is added to our argument that the REF continues to marginalise them as researchers. This is the subject of continuing enquiry.

Conclusion

Our findings highlight how, as editor-gatekeeper and discourse, the REF, continues to marginalise initial teacher education research. This has ongoing consequences

for the funding of the very research that is needed to validate teaching as an evidence-based profession and the very essence of the notion of teaching as an intellectual activity (Mutton 2019). Also of note is the impact of discourses, policies and events beyond REF that are having significant impact on teacher educators: the ITE Market Review; re-accreditation; mentoring; ITE student recruitment figures; financial challenges to the HEI sector as a whole and post-pandemic educational outcomes. All this adds up to a highly complex working environment where teacher educators must negotiate competing policies that are often seemingly in complete opposition to one another. If academics conducting teacher education research are to negotiate the demands of the REF, then they must be viewed as authors who are part of a larger discourse. Doing so will in part acknowledge how the cultural norms, historical contexts, and multiple voices mediated by REF as editor-gatekeeper and discourse, significantly affect how the ITE author's work is perceived and valued.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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