

A GLOBAL NORTH-SOUTH EVALUATION OF PARTNERSHIP SUPPORT FOR STUDENT TEACHERS ON PLACEMENT

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Abstract: There is a global recognition of the importance of the quality of teachers for the quality of education in schools and, whilst there is less unanimity about exactly how and where student teachers should be educated, there is consensus around the importance of the professional learning which takes place during the practicum or teaching practice. In this article, such learning is viewed through the lens of Lave and Wenger's conception of 'legitimate peripheral participation' and, using questionnaires, through the eyes of student teachers in Malawi, Mozambique, Northern Ireland and Uganda. The issues raised by the students presented both distinctive commonalities, particularly around mentoring, and also localised issues, such as rudimentary resource provision. Everything depended, however, on the establishment of intentionally structured support mechanisms which recognise the value and distinctive nature of these important periods of initial professional learning.

Keywords: Legitimate peripheral participation; mentoring; student teachers; teacher education.

It is an ineluctable truth that the experience of teaching practice is a critical stage in the process of becoming a competent teacher (Beck and Kosnik, 2002; Ngara, Ngwarai and Rodgers, 2012), and is 'at the heart of ... professional training' (Maynard, 2001: 39). Indeed, student teachers themselves perceive school-based mentoring to be a crucial element of initial teacher education (Hobson, 2002). This paper describes a four-country project, entitled Developing More Effective School-HEI Partnerships in Initial Teacher Education, which was funded (2010-2013) by the Department of International Development (DfID) and the British Council. It consisted of a series of workshops at four higher education institutions (HEIs): University

of Malawi, Zomba, Malawi; Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo, Mozambique; Ulster University, Coleraine, Northern Ireland; and Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. The project aimed to strengthen the support provided by schools for student teachers by developing more effective partnerships between schools and HEIs (Clarke et al., 2013).

In these countries, teaching practice, school experience, placement or practicum is a time when opportunities are provided to translate theory into practice. The student teachers face numerous challenges during what Wragg (1974) called the intoxicating task of survival. Lave and Wenger (1991) cast the practice-based, situational learning of such early stage practitioners as engaging in *legitimate peripheral participation*, and, whilst HEIs provide numerous support mechanisms, the degree to which the trainees perceive themselves to be well supported in practice can vary considerably (Douglas, 2011). Moreover, supporting them in schools during training is a wide-ranging, complex role, one that it is not the sole responsibility of a single individual (a mentor or teacher tutor), but also of other staff who offer advice (Hobson, 2002). Koerner, Rust and Baumgartner (2002: 35) state that:

“Student teaching is the culminating experience in a teacher education program. For good or ill, this experience has a significant impact on the student teacher who must juggle the responsibilities of teaching (and all that entails) while establishing and developing relationships with one or more cooperating teachers and a university supervisor.”

Whilst the school experience is challenging, benefits are derived by all three stakeholders within the partnership. The university gains access to settings for its students to put into practice ‘the reality of teaching that it cannot provide’ (Taylor, 2008: 23); both teacher educators and school mentors have opportunities for professional development; and students acquire skills and improve their practice. As Hascher, Cocard and Moser (2004) point out, though, while university supervisors monitor the practicum, responsibility for

it is handed to school mentors. Furlong and Maynard (1995: 2) warn, however, that ‘a fuller prescription of the role of the mentor will not be achieved until we have a more thorough understanding of the process involved in learning to teach’. This article reports the opinions of student teachers from four countries on their professional learning experience. The nascent professionals’ views, first, relate to how they perceive the roles of different stakeholders and, second, to their suggestions for strengthening school experience. Their professional learning is viewed through the lens of Lave and Wenger’s notions of legitimate peripheral participation.

The support of stakeholders

Key features of effective practice during student placement were outlined by HMIE (2005) as, for example: students being valued by schools, treated as professionals in training, placed with good role models, given access to resources and given responsibility to teach classes on their own. All these are within a supportive learning environment in which ‘they can experiment and learn from their mistakes’ (HMIE, 2005: 15). Gathering student teachers’ views, Beck and Kosnik (2002) reported that a key component of a good practicum placement is for mentors to be friendly and to give emotional support. Student teachers wanted to be a legitimate part of the school’s teacher workforce, respected and treated ‘as a teacher’ rather than be imbued with lower status; to form a collaborative relationship with their mentor in relation to planning and finding resources, but with limited intervention during a lesson; to have the flexibility to be innovative with teaching methods; and to receive feedback from the mentor, a feature of the utmost importance (Darling-Hammond, Wise and Klein, 1995). Moreover, trainees wanted a workload that was realistic but not excessive. Hobson’s (2002: 9) findings also showed feedback and assistance with lesson planning, as well as mentors modelling teaching practice, to be ‘centrally important in the process of learning teaching’. It seems, therefore, that the school mentor’s role is a crucial one, although its impact can be positive or negative. Rice (2004) suggests that the best outcome is a two-way conversation on an equal footing between the mentor and the mentee. Awaya et al. (2003: 45) also see mentoring as a partnership: ‘The journey involves the building of an equal

relationship characterised by trust, the sharing of expertise, moral support, and knowing when to help and when to sit back.’

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work on legitimate peripheral participation provides a meaningful lens for research that addresses practice-based learning in schools, something over which HEI staff usually have more limited control (Hascher et al., 2004). A social and situated conceptualisation of the student teachers’ learning, therefore, is at the heart of this multi-national study. This may be understood in the context of situated learning within a community of practice (Maynard, 2001). Lave and Wenger (1991) conceived of a community of practice as a venue for social, situated learning by mutual engagement with other members, and negotiation of the enterprise and of the distinctive repertoire of that community. Concerning teacher education, the cast of community members is diverse and includes head teachers, HEI tutors, class teachers, heads of department, school technicians and other student teachers. They induct the novice student teachers in Lave and Wenger’s process of legitimate peripheral participation within which a neophyte’s required learning takes place, not so much through the reification of a curriculum, as by means of modified forms of participation that are structured to open the practice to non-members.

Student teachers are *newcomers* within this community and learn through becoming part of *practice as a resource for learning* (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 85), and through engagement (both formal and informal) with serving teachers – *old-timers* (in the parlance of these writers) – along peers and others. This is made possible through a combination of *peripherality* and *legitimacy*. Wenger (1998) suggests that peripherality provides a guided and gradual exposure to full practice so that students have:

- *lessened intensity* – for example, through periods of initial observation followed by reduced teaching loads;
- *lessened risk* – for example, through close supervision by experienced staff and mentors; and

- *lessened production pressures* – for example, through less administration, report writing.

Sufficient legitimacy is provided for student teachers to allow them to be treated, in many respects, like other teachers, with the support of a well-respected senior teacher. In addition, it is crucially important that they have enough legitimacy to allow their ‘inevitable stumblings and violations to become opportunities for learning rather than cause for dismissal, neglect or exclusion’ (Wenger, 1998: 101).

The context of initial teacher education in Malawi, Mozambique, Northern Ireland and Uganda

The research compares the practicum experiences of student teachers from two vastly different parts of the world, sub-Saharan Africa and Northern Ireland, in respect of the contributions from both the schools and the HEIs as members of a partnership. The most striking contrasts between the teacher workforce of the African nations and that of Northern Ireland are around the resource base for teacher education and the relative supply/demand of teachers, with Northern Ireland having an over-supply of teachers and cutting teacher education quotas (Grant Thornton, 2013). Conversely, in common with other African nations, there are some severe teacher shortages in Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda (UNESCO, 2013). A key challenge for the project team was collaborating across four teacher education systems which are briefly summarised below.

First, in Malawi, at primary level, initial primary teacher education is offered through teacher education colleges. Year one is a residential, full-time, taught course; year two is full-time, school-based training through teaching practice. At secondary level, initial teacher education is offered mostly by the University of Malawi through a four and a half year (nine semesters) taught Bachelor of Education programme with the last semester for teaching practice. A relatively new public University (Mzuzu University) offers a similar programme. There is also Domasi College of Education which operates directly under the Ministry of Education and offers the

Diploma in Secondary school teaching. The college was established in 1994 to address the shortage of teachers in Malawi secondary schools.

Second, in Mozambique, public and private institutions currently provide different teacher education programmes. For primary education, the public ones are the 24 institutos de formação de professores (IFPs) (teacher education institutions) providing the Grade 10+1 programme. The private institution is the Ajuda Dinamarquesa de Povo para Povo. Teachers for secondary, technical and professional education are educated at the Eduardo Mondlane University and the Pedagogical University in a four-year, full-time programme.

Third, in Northern Ireland, there are five routes to initial teacher education (ITE): two universities offer the one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE); two university colleges provide the four-year Bachelor of Education; and the Open University offers the post-primary PGCE. A 27-competence model embraces ITE, induction and early professional development (EPD) (Moran, Dallat and Abbott, 1999). The dominant theme of 'partnership' signifies a lead partner at each stage: the universities/colleges during ITE, the local education authorities during induction, and the schools during EPD (NITEC and CEPD, 1998), with each partner contributing in an integrated way along the teacher education continuum. The PGCE (which is the focus of this study) consists of two blocks of practical, school-based teaching and face-to-face academic study in university.

Fourth, in Uganda, there are five government-established national teachers' colleges and three private ones, with forty-eight primary teachers' colleges and five privately owned ones. Most of the thirty-five universities offer teacher education programmes, but less than a quarter have initial science teacher education due to lack of facilities and the costs involved. The recent introduction of the Universal Primary Education programme in 1997 and the Universal Post-Primary Education and Training Programme in 2007 have seen greatly increased student enrolment, thus affecting teacher demand

(some 9,000-11,000 trainees recruited annually). Kyambogo University is in charge of training all primary and Grade V teachers.

Method

There were two parts to the study allowing a mixed methods approach. Methodological triangulation (using two or more methods of data collection) allows richer, more detailed data to be collected, as ‘exclusive reliance on one method ... may bias or distort the particular slices of reality’ being investigated (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011: 195). First, as a preliminary (pilot) study, a focus group was conducted with student teachers from three jurisdictions in order to identify key issues: the Universities of Malawi, Makerere and Ulster. Focus groups reveal ‘how people *think* about an issue – their reasoning about *why* things are as they are, *why* they hold the views they do’ (Laws, Harper and Marcus, 2003, cited in Bell, 2005: 162). The focus groups were conducted in each separate college by research team members, all experienced teacher educators but not assessors of the participants. The findings facilitated the design of a self-completion questionnaire for the main study.

Second, the questionnaire was given to a total of 328 student teachers in the four countries, to seek their views and experiences of teaching practice. A questionnaire was considered best for gathering geographically distributed, cross-national data with a fairly large number of respondents (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). It was designed to ensure clarity of language, clear layout and the avoidance of ‘ambiguity and imprecision’ (Bell, 2005: 138). The Mozambique respondents required the survey questions and, subsequently, their responses to be translated from English into Portuguese.

The 328 student teachers in Malawi, Mozambique, Northern Ireland and Uganda consisted of, respectively, forty-three B.Ed students, fifty-five teacher education students, thirty Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students, and 200 B.Sc/Ed and B.A/Ed students, representing approximately one-fifth of the post-primary teacher education cohorts in each

institution. Piloting was through agreement on the form of the questionnaire through circulation of drafts between the four university tutors, and with primary students at Ulster University. The returns rates were 100 percent each for Malawi, Mozambique and Northern Ireland, and 93.5 percent for Uganda – 43, 55, 30 and 187 cases, respectively, generating an overall total of 315 responses (96 percent). The statistics were provided by university colleagues in each country and are presented separately for each. Where small sub-sets arose, raw figures only were used.

Ethical approval was granted for both the preliminary and main studies. The respondents gave voluntary informed consent, were assured of complete confidentiality and anonymity, understood their right to withdraw at any time without coercion or penalty, and were told that questionnaire completion formed no part of assessment. The data is reported against each question using selected extracts as appropriate ‘to capture the essence of [a] point ... without unnecessary complexity’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 93), followed by a discursive overview outlining emerging patterns, differences, international common ground, and, finally, conclusions.

Findings

The preliminary study allowed the project team to form initial impressions of the student teachers’ perspectives on sources of support during teaching practice in three of the four countries (Clarke et al., 2013). Clear similarities and differences emerged from the focus group, although space does not allow all of the initial findings to be reported here. A particularly interesting *vignette* appears in Figure 1 which shows a comparative ranking of the student views, and the relative position of the university supervisors. They were ranked highest in Malawi and Uganda, yet much lower in Northern Ireland. Recently qualified and other teachers, including Heads of Department, were rated highly in all three jurisdictions. This data enabled the team to identify key issues to address in the questionnaire.

Figure 1. Comparative ranking of students' views about provision of support on teaching practice

Malawi	Northern Ireland	Uganda
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. University supervisors 2. Other teachers in the school 3. Heads of Department 4. Other student teachers 5. The pupils themselves 6. Resources 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Other teachers in department 2. Recently qualified teachers 3. Former teachers 4. The pupils themselves 5. University supervisors 6. Staff in a previous school placement 7. Other student teachers (peers) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. University supervisors 2. Recently qualified teachers 3. Former teachers 4. Heads of Department 5. Class teacher 6. Resources

The findings are presented as follows:

- the student population;
- allocation of teachers to support students during school placement;
- frequency of meetings between students and teachers;
- relationship between students and teachers;
- support provided by nominated teacher during school placement;
- ways in which school practice was marked; and
- suggested improvements to teaching practice.

The student population

Regarding gender ratios, the imbalance in favour of females is evident in the figures for 2007 in North America and Western Europe at 61 percent; those

for the Northern Ireland (NI) student teachers in the study are broadly in keeping with the 29 percent of males in secondary schools (UNESCO, 2011: 2, Table 1.1). The Mozambique (Mz) and Uganda (U) figures compare to those cited for sub-Saharan Africa where, by contrast, only 30% of secondary teachers are female. Interestingly, Malawi (M) is different with over half of its respondents male (53.8 percent) and under half female (Table 1).

Table 1 **Gender breakdown of student teachers in all four countries (%)**

	Malawi (n=43)	Mozambique (n=55)	N. Ireland (n=30)	Uganda (n=187)
Male	53.8	64.1	33.3	60.4
Female	46.2	36.9	66.7	39.6

Allocation of teachers to support students during teaching practice

A large majority of students in Malawi, Mozambique and Northern Ireland had a teacher allocated to them during teaching practice (74.4 percent, 92.7 percent and 80 percent, respectively). In Uganda, however, over half did not (58.6 percent).

Frequency of meetings between students and teachers

The students were most likely to meet their school tutors more than once a week during placement, particularly in Malawi although least so in Northern Ireland, where weekly and monthly meetings together accounted for over half the responses. Twice monthly meetings were uncommon overall, as were monthly meetings except for Northern Ireland (about one-third) (Table 2).

Table 2 Frequency of student-teacher meetings during placement (%)

	Malawi (n=25)	Mozambique (n=53)	N. Ireland (n=25)	Uganda (n=73)
More than once a week	80.5	56.7	36.0	57.5
Once a week	6.5	22.6	24.0	32.9
Once a month	6.5	7.5	32.0	4.1
Twice a month	6.5	13.2	8.0	5.5

Relationship between students and teachers

Northern Ireland and Ugandan students were most likely to say that their relationship with teachers in school was ‘very supportive’ (almost two-thirds in each case), with over half of Malawian respondents in agreement. Notably fewer Mozambique students, however, used this category (under a quarter), most saying ‘supportive’ and one-third ‘not supportive at all’ (Table 3).

Table 3 Supportiveness of student-teacher relationship in schools (%)

	Malawi (n=43)	Mozambique (n=46)	N. Ireland (n=28)	Uganda (n=184)
Very supportive	58.1	24.0	65.0	65.0
Supportive	38.7	43.0	25.0	25.0
Not at all supportive	3.2	33.0	10.0	10.0

Support provided by nominated teachers during teaching practice

Examining support provided on teaching practice, there were predominantly positive comments in all four countries with few of a negative nature. Thirty of the forty-three Malawian students (69.7 percent) referred mostly to support in the following areas including using resources, setting objectives, assessment and motivation pupils, with raw figures used because of small numbers (Table 4).

Table 4 **Areas in which support provided to students on school placement in Malawi (n=43)**

<i>Areas in which support provided</i>	<i>Frequency (Raw figures)</i>
Resources/materials	8
Schemes of work and lesson plans	6
Classroom management	6
General/moral support	6
Identifying areas for improvement	4
Presenting and teaching lessons	4
Subject information	3
Teaching methods	2
Observation	2
Assessment	2

Some favourable comments were:

“Assisted on how best to use teaching resources and to assess students.”

“... guided me and helped in sourcing materials.”

“He went through my schemes of work and showed me where I went wrong. He gave me advice on which books I should use and also gave me a notebook full of experiments from which I could choose experiments for my class.”

“How best to write objectives and how best to use and choose teaching aids.”

“Helped me ... how to teach more effectively and how to behave well in the institution: be more of a professional.”

“She taught me the importance of making a clear introduction in order to motivate the students and the importance of a well-marked conclusion that cross-cuts the development.”

“Very supportive in terms of subject materials, and explained to me some concepts that I could not understand on my own.”

“Letting me observe his classes and he also observed mine.”

One student summed up: ‘A wonderful experience. Both the teacher and the administration supported us’, although much less positive were, ‘The teacher was not helpful in terms of materials/teaching aids and was not there to help when I [was] faced with some difficulties’ and ‘The teacher was not present at any time.’

From the fifty-five Mozambique students, forty-nine (89 percent) identified similar help given, mainly with lesson plans, resources and moral support (Table 5).

Table 5 Areas in which support provided to students on school placement in Mozambique (n=49)

<i>Areas in which support provided</i>	<i>Frequency (Raw figures)</i>
Help with lesson planning and preparation	12
Resources/materials provided	11
Moral/psychological support	8
Implementation of projects/activities	5
Pupil-teacher relationships	4
Thematic harmonisation plan	3
Sustenance support	2
Technical support	2
Help with classroom difficulties	1
Identifying special educational needs	1

The thirty Northern Ireland trainee teachers either identified specific types of help given, or commented generally on the nature and extent of areas in which schools gave them support, whether good or bad (Table 6).

Table 6 Areas in which support provided to students on school placement in Northern Ireland (n=30)

<i>Areas in which support provided</i>	<i>Frequency (Raw figures)*</i>
Areas for improvement/development	7
Offering advice and guidance	7
Feedback and evaluation	6
Checking and talking through lesson plans	4
Giving reassurance	3
Reviewing lessons	3
Observing lessons	2
Help with behaviour management	2
Giving ideas/suggestions	2

* Do not add to 30 as some respondents said more than one area

Nine students described the nature and high standard of support given by teachers in school:

“Excellent support and available for advice when needed.”

“Very supportive through email and telephone if needed.”

“A critical friend.”

“A shared learning experience.”

“Time to discuss issues.”

“Included within the department.”

Three, however, spoke very negatively about support:

“Very little to none.”

“Did not seem overly concerned and could have been more supportive.”

“The teacher was very approachable but was not available for feedback and didn’t discuss my development.”

Similarly, Ugandan students pinpointed specific help given, or responded more generally about support, both favourably and less so (Table 7). From 187, 126 replied (67.3 percent).

Table 7 Areas in which support provided to students on school placement in Uganda (n=126)

<i>Areas in which support provided</i>	<i>Frequency (Raw figures)</i>
Offering advice and guidance	25
Subject related support and resources	22
Checking and talking through lesson plans	20
Academic, financial, and moral support	14
Orientation to the school and timetabling	11
Areas for improvement/development	11
Help with behaviour management	8
Giving reassurance	5
Reviewing lessons	5
Observing and reviewing lessons	5

Four Ugandan students described the support given by teachers in schools in positive terms:

“Supportive and encouraged me greatly.”

“Advised me on everything I did.”

“They believed in me.”

Three less favourable experiences were:

“Very little [support] to none.”

“Saw us as foreigners who never fitted well in the school.”

“Saw us as interfering with normal running of school.”

Suggested improvements to teaching practice

All thirty students from Northern Ireland, forty-six out of fifty-five from Mozambique, 119 of the 187 from Uganda, and seventeen out of forty-three from Malawi suggested changes in teaching practice (100 percent, 83 percent, 63.3 percent and 39.5 percent, respectively). Five broad areas were identified in three of the four countries: the first three as listed below in African countries only, and the remaining two in Northern Ireland and in two African countries:

- resources (62: 3M, 3MZ, 56U);
- the role of the university supervisor (60: 2M, 26MZ, 32U);
- financial support (55: 5M, 8MZ, 42U);
- the relationship between teaching practice schools and universities/colleges (34: 3MZ, 9NI, 22U); and
- better/fairer organisation of teaching practice (27: 4M, 11NI, 12U)

Concerning *resources*, it was clear that some students simply did not have adequate teaching and instructional materials. In regard to *the role of university supervisors* during placement, improvements put forward were that they should:

- supervise and be competent in their own area of specialisation;

- monitor student teachers more by having greater involvement in the student teaching process;
- have more time for student teachers, visit during teaching practice, and provide guidance;
- conduct more visits to students' placement schools;
- respect the timetables given to students;
- come to student's class at the beginning of lessons and remain until the end;
- support students by stating clear objectives of teaching and identifying appropriate methodologies; and
- be more friendly.

Regarding *finance*, the Malawian student teachers called for:

- the teaching practice allowance not to be given 'before TP time';
- the teaching practice allowance to be increased to fit with the current economic status of the country;
- a timely upkeep of money delivery; and
- the allowance to be given on time as delays cause problems [for] the student teachers in terms of rentals with landlords.

Mozambique students asked for grants to be provided during teaching practice and, similarly, Ugandan respondents wanted more funding to support them during placement.

Concerning *the relationship between placement schools and universities/colleges*, students in Mozambique, Northern Ireland and Uganda suggested increased, improved communication between school and university, particularly in respect of the relationship between the student supervisor and school teacher.

Students in Malawi, Northern Ireland and Uganda called for *better and fairer organization of teaching practice*. This related to university tutors' school visits and better communication with school heads of department before placement. Northern Ireland students asked for the role of teacher tutor (mentor) in schools to be on a more professional basis, with more contact and regular meetings. They also wanted opportunities for observation which was formative in ethos and atmosphere.

Interestingly, most of the other suggestions made were common to students in all four countries. These included *inter alia* having the chance to observe peers, reducing their lesson, an emphasis on the non-teaching aspects of school practice, the universities facilitating student placement in various schools, improving school support by strengthening partnerships with the universities, and supervisors harmonising supervision so as to minimise contradictions among themselves.

Discussion and conclusion

The evidence here points towards considerable consistency in preoccupations and perspectives of student teachers across these countries. Some distinctive local issues were also highlighted and, in discussing the findings and drawing any conclusions, it is essential to be mindful of the complex, challenging, context-specific realities in the African countries. Indeed, Hardman et al. (2011: 670) caution against '... the dangers of international agencies urging developing countries to adopt 'best practices' with regard to teacher professional development that ignore the everyday realities of the classroom, and the motivations and capacity of the teachers to deliver such reforms.'

In the current study, a key concern was the variability in the support provided, with obvious differences in the level and quality of help given to

student teachers by both universities and schools within each country. It is clear that resources are a contentious issue in all four locations, although the contrast between Northern Ireland and the African countries makes the complaints from the former appear trivial – so-called ‘first world problems’, as compared to the ‘real life’ concerns of the latter about having enough food and money and somewhere safe to stay.

Resource deficits can have obvious effects on the fundamental well-being of students, but also impact on both the legitimacy and peripherality which are identified by Lave and Wenger (1991) as being so crucial for student learning. Full legitimate participation is only possible where student teachers have access to a resource base which is broadly similar to that of serving teachers. Only then will they be able to take full advantage of learning opportunities during placement in schools. Peripherality is also impinged upon where student teachers have too heavy a workload and where serving teachers do not make allowances for a lack of expertise, seeking instead to highlight mistakes rather than to rectify them.

It is clear that student teachers across the four countries recognised that better partnerships between schools and HEIs could help to correct these problems, with university tutors ensuring that school staff fully understand and support the nature of student roles and learning. For students to learn effectively from their practicum, this must be located and legitimised through better relationships between schools and HEIs with experienced staff (the ‘old timers’) collaborating to encourage the newcomers in ways which support both their peripherality and their legitimacy. Within this context, student teachers can enjoy time, space and growth of confidence during even the most challenging teaching practice. One key project outcome was the development of local mentorship courses in each of the countries, including Master’s level modules based around an agreed set of Guidelines for Student Teacher Mentors (Moran et al., 2012).

Understandably, it is only in Ulster University that the role of information and communications technology (ICT) in teacher education has

been researched by teacher educators, who examined the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) to support students' learning whilst they are scattered during placement in schools throughout the jurisdiction. Clarke (2009) sought to diminish the impact of separation and distance by developing online communities of practice in which students engaged in carefully considered, reflective writing, in more informal discussions, and in the online sharing of resources within and across cohorts and thus, also, between schools. In Makerere, where geographical distances are greater and roads are more poorly developed, some early initiatives are underway through sharing resources using CD-ROMs in order to circumvent problems with slow/non-existent internet connections.

The scale of the crucial need for qualified teachers in sub-Saharan Africa and the inherent major challenges (Buckler, 2011: 244), together with the rapid development of telecommunication networks across the continent in the early years of the twenty-first century, point convincingly towards an urgent need to use the power of ICT to provide teacher education on a much greater scale (Dladla and Moon, 2013; Unwin, 2005). Nonetheless, the practical placement, together with the opportunity and capacity for student teachers to learn though supported, legitimate and peripheral participation in individual schools, are seen to be at the very heart of learning to teach, from Antrim in Northern Ireland to Zomba in Malawi.

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