ABSTRACT The research for this article resulted from international team reviews/validations of teacher education courses in a variety of Eastern European Countries. Visits involved examination of documents, observations of student course work and meetings and discussions with tutors, managers, students and employers from a variety of higher education organisations in new EU countries. Informal and formal discussions also occurred with team members and with representatives of education ministries and quality assurance personnel. The results showed that empathy, attentive listening skills and dialogue allied to firmly set goals could, in a very short time, help individuals and organisations to face up to the challenge of change and themselves bring about changes in thinking and behaviour which resulted in a move from a tutor/instructor dominated model of teacher education to one where the needs of the student were in the forefront. The changes accomplished in a short time were in some cases astonishing and staff involved in this revolution must be congratulated, as should be the foreign experts who helped them, together with the countries who laid themselves open to such a demanding process. The research duration was over five years and involved revisits to many organisations where only limited approval for courses, or course closure had been initially recommended. It was possible therefore to observe the patterns of emerging change.

Key words: Teacher Education, European Union, Higher Education, Quality Assurance
Introduction

This article details and examines the efforts of teams of ‘foreign experts’ to aid Eastern European countries to improve their teacher education and reports on the achievements made and concerns raised by the projects. The OECD (2005) report did not examine all the emerging/aspiring EU countries, but the their report on The Slovak Republic could equally be applied to other countries emerging, during the 1990s, from under soviet control. As the report points out, countries across the world are continually seeking to improve the quality of education offered in their schools and to help education meet the changing needs of society. Democracy and competition for jobs has resulted in a need to change education so as to help citizens of these former communist states take advantage of their new roles and freedoms and help them counteract the negative effects of lower employment possibilities and less state protection. Nowhere is this need for change more evident than in Higher Education, in particular the education of teachers in whose hands lies the responsibility the nurture of new democratic citizens. To achieve this it is essential to examine the education teachers receive in both initial training and continuing professional development.

Since the beginning of the 1990s and the collapse of the Soviet Empire the newly emerging states in Eastern Europe have been attempting to change and adjust their approaches to teacher education to incorporate a more ‘European’ approach. With the advent of possible and actual European Union (EU) membership, political changes towards more democratic ideologies, demographic change resulting in a rapidly decreasing birth rate and emigration, have driven change in all aspects of the societies. Saarinen (2005) discusses how policies on education quality spread internationally, often through a discursive as opposed to a legislative process. Changes are made through an interaction between international trends and national decisions. Halpin and Troya (1995) and Ball (1998) show how the latest slogans and jargon spread across countries, but that their effects, when adopted, demonstrate the difference between countries. These ideas could aptly be applied to the recent debates in Europe about teacher education and the question of competences/standards spreading across the continent.

At the same time the EU was working towards more coherence of objectives for Higher Education in Europe. Education and Training are essential aspects of the EU’s Lisbon strategy, where the European Council set a target for 2010 for the EU to become a dynamic, knowledge based economy, based on lifelong learning and the adaptation and modernisation of education and training systems. The Bologna declaration 1999 (Europa, 2004) began with the examination of the struc-
ture of qualifications and has moved towards the harmonisation of those qualifications across Europe. Saarinen (2005, p. 200) in examining the Bologna process, demonstrates how the use of the word ‘quality’ in documents has increased over the years and that meanings attributed to the word are becoming more homogeneous, homing in on ‘the technical details of Quality Assurance systems in the signatory countries’.

In 2003 in Berlin the EU Education Ministers agreed on a more cohesive approach to quality assurance in higher education institutions (QAA, 2005). The development of peer review processes for quality assurance agencies in the EU countries and the establishment of an agreed set of standards for the quality assurance processes in higher education across Europe were tasks set for the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Moves towards cohesion can bring difficulties as the cultures in the countries of the EU differ widely, especially those countries which emerged from USSR domination in the nineties. Change, even if desired, is nearly always stressful, involving fear of change and often lack of the skills and knowledge required to bring it about (Fullan with Ballew, 2004). Certainly if one’s own beliefs and values are questioned, the process can be a very painful and increased accountability and changes imposed from outside the institution can result in mounting stress and a lowering of morale (Day et al, 2003). Temple and Billing (2003) argue that control, not quality enhancement, is the dominating concern of the quality assurance agencies across Eastern Europe, suggesting that a more flexible approach to the notion of quality is needed, more related to the real goals of institutions. However, Galbraith (2003) points to the wide variation in the quality of higher education in this area due to financial strictures facing state organisations and the springing up of private institutions which, though better at serving the needs of post-communist states, lack prestige.

The move towards a more Western European approach to teacher education has not been easy for some new EU States. Encouraging students’ critical thinking and group working have proved difficult, as has the provision of resources and ICT equipment (Vebraite, 2005; Giedraitis, 2005). However, success in providing distance education has been highlighted in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2001) reports on the Baltic States, particularly Estonia. The willingness of many of these late EU entry countries to put themselves forward for judgement from Western European advisors is commendable. Cerych (2002) raises questions about the use of foreign education advisors in countries emerging from communist regimes, advising of the need for good understanding of the country visited and a working use of the language. However, it is possible there are some pan-European standards for education that can be ap-
plied and that foreign experts, with empathy towards issues of change and development, can provide a more objective viewpoint than insiders. The language problem however is harder to overcome as finding foreign experts with a command of eastern European languages, presents considerable difficulties.

Research

The researcher has been involved in assessing education quality in England and teacher education in a variety of Eastern European countries from the beginning of this century. The research was carried out as a result of chairing and working with several international teams undertaking reviews/validations of teacher education courses in twelve higher education Organisations in a variety of Eastern European Countries. The visits and teams were organised by the quality assurance agencies of the countries involved. Practices varied, but generally followed the pattern of self-evaluation reports, a team meeting with agency staff, visits to the organisations, team discussions, recording and report writing. The work on-site involved examination of documents relating to self-evaluation, and validation reports, observations of student course work and meetings and discussions with tutors, managers, students and employers. Informal and formal discussions also occurred with the members of teams undertaking the quality assurance visits and with representatives of education ministries and quality assurance personnel. At the end of each visit the researcher produced a report for the quality assurance agency and government concerned, summarising the findings of the individual institution reports produced by the review teams.

It was clear from the quality agency’s briefings that the teams were expected to encourage change and in some cases to be responsible for the closure of unsatisfactory courses. However, the main aim of the teams was to aid improvement in and modernisation of teacher education, without the loss of the cultural milieu and with due regard to the financial situation in Eastern Europe. The tensions caused by these disparate aims had to be dealt with sensitively by making allowances for the lack of resources whilst encouraging more autonomy for students and working hard to raise perceptions about the need for of co-operation and self-evaluation

The prevailing culture

In all of the institutions visited the predominant student and staff gender had been and was female, echoing trends across the rest of Europe. In most cases the rea-
sons given for this gender bias by staff, students and employers was the low pay and status of teachers and teacher educators. The practice in certain countries of allowing all those who wished and had passed the school leaving examination to progress to teacher training and receive government financial support, despite the lack of need for teachers was problematic. A seeming reluctance in some institutions to fail students at any stage, also gave cause for concern.

A culture of shifting blame to others was very apparent in some of the self-evaluation documents, where institutions blamed government action, law, low finance and demographic change to demonstrate that their desire for change was being hampered by the actions of others. Despite this, the overall impression of these organisations gained by the visit teams was of willingness of teacher educators to welcome international teams of assessors.

Results

The general findings are reported below and are a summary of the issues raised in many of the organisations visited presenting an overall picture as opposed to detail of individual organisations or countries.

Lack of a holistic course structure

Study was often subdivided into many separate parts, frequently related to the interests of staff or historical planning. There was a lack of a holistic progressive feel to courses; they were more a collection of disparate units. This led to stagnation and in many cases a separation between theory and practice. A proliferation of small courses with very low credit points was echoed in the provision of degree/diploma courses themselves. Class sizes as a result of the wide course provision were often very small, a fact that in Western Europe would not have been tolerated as they would have been considered as economically non-viable. Often it was difficult to discover a clear link between the course aims, subject aims, those professed by self-assessment/evaluation documents, learning outcomes in subject areas and assessment. This was related to fragmented course design. This is an area that needs considerable revision and further work.

Subject content

In many cases this was historical and related, in colleges in particular, to the cultural strengths of the area including local craft work and a strong emphasis on mu-
sic. The creative and joyful areas of the curriculum observed by the teams, including an emphasis on music making and the production of artefacts raised envy and nostalgia in those members who had seen such curriculum elements disappear in England after the 1988 Education Reform Act.

Foreign language provision was low and for students who were not proficient in the mother tongue of the country, little extra help was offered resulting in drop out or low grades. Lack of foreign language ability also hampered both staff’s and students’ ability to read foreign textbooks, journals and the internet. Some colleges and universities have responded well to the desire for proficiency in languages, an increase in students following language courses for primary teachers being evident on team return visits.

ICT as a subject or course was provided for the students in most institutions, but as a means to help students themselves become proficient in the use of software programmes, not in the pedagogical implications of ICT in the classroom. The use of computers in universities and colleges has grown immeasurably with the advent of EU funding and this was also beginning in schools. However, generally new teachers were still not being prepared for this change in pedagogy.

**Pedagogy**

The lack of development of students as autonomous learners was a real concern on initial visits. Linked to this was a lack of knowledge of learning styles and little in the way of reflective practice. Tutors appeared to believe that the education of teachers should be content driven. Subsequent visits showed the advice of the visiting teams had resulted in some progress, but this culture is proving hard to change.

**Assessment**

There was a tendency to over grade work. This appeared to be related to the lack of co-operation and idea transfer between institutions and the absence of a consistent use of external examiners. Assessment was very exam oriented and standards of final dissertations were low at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Concern was also expressed about a lack of consistency and variation in feedback provision between institutions in a country and between individual tutors, sometimes to a worrying degree. Often there were no links on assessed work to specific criteria or learning outcomes. This made some students complain that the assessment process was arbitrary and not helpful for improvement.
Collaboration Across EU Boundaries

Qualifications

The two-tier system of training resulted in colleges having a highly practical approach, while universities profess their superiority through the higher theoretical content of courses. Students from the colleges in many cases gained a diploma not a degree, needing two years further study to obtain the desired Bachelor’s qualification. This was causing rifts and division between colleges and universities. The Bologna agreement (Europa, 2004) proposes a graduate profession and is strongly supported by the OECD, so the decision of one country to revert primary teacher education to non-degree awarding colleges is hard to understand.

Academic standards

In general there was a worrying lack of progression in academic rigour within the courses. This appeared to be related to the divided, broken nature of the programmes offered, the basis of which was knowledge acquisition. The problem was compounded in the colleges, on the initial visits, by low levels of staff qualification and professional development. On subsequent visits it was observed many college staff were making valiant efforts to improve their qualifications to Bachelor or Master’s level despite crippling teaching loads.

Student support

In many ways this was outstanding. Students had easy access to tutors and high contact time with small teaching groups. Many students in Western Europe would be astonished at the breadth and depth of support provided. However, this had led to a culture of dependency, linked to the knowledge transmission model favoured by many staff and prevented students developing learning autonomy. School mentor training also still needs to be addressed.

Course evaluations

This concept had been wholeheartedly embraced in many institutions. Students were welcomed onto planning boards at all levels. On return visits it was apparent that student input had led to changes. Students were eager to take part in the quality assurance process, but on occasions, had yet to learn that tact is required when being critical of others.
Conclusion

The international teams were delighted to see that the advice given had such positive effects on the progression of teacher education courses in the countries visited. There was no desire to expect the copying of courses provided in the West, rather an attempt to raise the quality of what was offered, whilst being sensitive to the needs of the countries visited. The enthusiasm and eagerness of many colleagues to embrace change and to alter approaches to learning were very impressive. The welcomes offered were warm and encouraging and the team members did not feel they were intruding, rather collaborating with colleagues to aid change. There were some problems such as time allotted and the lack of ability to read student work but this was helped by return visits by time allowance being extended and the inclusion of national members in the teams. Cerych’s (2002) concerns over language were overcome by the use of a series of good translators and the willingness of everyone concerned to pursue subjects until clarity was obtained for all. Sensitivity about the situation of the countries visited was of course essential, but this is also true when making quality assurance visits to organisations in one’s own country. Continuing professional development does remain an issue, as though many colleagues go into schools to work with teachers and produce papers for university conferences, courses on new pedagogical practices are not often offered to tutors.

The teams felt highly privileged to be able to aid colleagues in the countries visited and all agreed that they too had learned a great deal from the experience, echoing the ideas of Scott (2002) who advocates cross country learning as a way of enriching thinking. This proved a useful and worthwhile European co-operation which we would recommend is extended. The teams saw much to be admired including the dedication of staff, student support and a wide curriculum including a concentration on the arts, all of which enriched the student experience. Strong too was the readiness to accept student evaluations of the teaching and the curriculum on offer coupled with an understanding that to train good teachers takes time, something that we seem to have lost in England with the pressures of finance and the questionable belief that ‘high flyer’s made redundant from other profession can be prepared to be successful teaching in a very short time. We too have things to learn.
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