



October 2022

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# Initial Teacher Education reform in Wales: emerging strengths and areas for consideration

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## Background and context

Following a series of accreditation assessment rounds, there are now seven partnerships (comprising universities and their partner schools) of initial teacher education (ITE) in Wales. The partnerships provide undergraduate and post-graduate routes into teaching. From September 2020, two new routes became available, a part-time PGCE and an employment-based route, both provided by the Open University Partnership.

Over the last three years we have worked together with stakeholders in ITE to develop our new inspection guidance. [How we inspect in Initial Teacher Education](#) and [What we inspect in Initial Teacher Education](#) were published on 1 September 2021. These documents were published in draft to support our pilot inspection arrangements and will be updated in summer 2022.

The inspection guidance for ITE has been written to reflect Estyn's inspection arrangements and the new Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS)<sup>1</sup>, and strongly links to the Criteria for the accreditation of initial teacher education programmes in Wales<sup>2</sup>. The new programmes of ITE that began in September 2019 require:

- an increased role for schools
- a clearer role for universities
- joint ownership of the ITE programme
- structured opportunities to link school and university learning
- the centrality of research

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<sup>1</sup> [Professional standards - Hwb \(gov.wales\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [criteria-for-the-accreditation-of-initial-teacher-education-programmes-in-wales.pdf \(gov.wales\)](#)

To test out our inspection guidance, from October 2019, we began a series of 'try-outs'. Since then, we have visited all partnerships to test out our inspection methodology and ensure that our inspection approaches help inspectors to gather evidence that reflects ITE reform and support improvement in the sector. Initially, our try-outs were carried out face-to-face, but we continued with this work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by undertaking our engagements virtually. On each try-out, we were joined by Peer Inspectors trained to inspect in ITE. These senior school and university staff were vital to the try-out process. They shared their experiences of developing the new partnerships and contributed to the development of our approaches to inspection.

Our try-outs had three aims:

- To ensure that the new inspection guidance supports the development of effective practice in the sector
- To ensure that the new inspection guidance helps inspectors to gather evidence that reflects ITE reform
- To identify and negate, as far as possible, any 'unintended consequences' of the new inspection guidance. to minimise the risk of driving unproductive behaviours

To meet these aims, we decided to focus on the fundamental changes to ITE. We chose five themes that reflect the requirements of the new programmes.

The objectives of the try-outs were to test out inspection activity to collect evidence for:

- Monitoring students' progress over the duration of their programme
- How well the programmes prepare students to teach the Curriculum for Wales
- How well the programmes blend theory and practice in linking school and university learning
- The development of research practice in university and schools and how this impacts on student teachers' standards
- The joint leadership of the programmes between the university and its partner schools

The purpose of the try-outs was not to evaluate individual partnerships, but to test our approaches to inspection. Through considering the evidence presented during the try-outs, we were also able to gain a greater understanding of the development of ITE in Wales and to gather broad messages about this evolution.

Throughout the try-outs, we had feedback from the partnerships that helped us to refine our inspection guidance. By undertaking the try-outs, we tested our approaches by collecting evidence from the partnerships, and we were able to feed back our findings to the partnerships. We gave the caveat to each partnership that we had not been able to triangulate our evidence thoroughly, but we were able to report on 'emerging strengths' and 'questions to consider', so as to support the partnership in their ongoing development.

Overall, however, key messages arose from the accumulated feedback. This report draws together these overarching findings.

## Monitoring students' progress over the duration of their programme

All partnerships are developing helpful systems to track the progress of student teachers and to gather data. They gather valuable information about students' academic achievement and evaluations of their progress on school experience. A few partnerships also collect information about students' well-being. In most partnerships, leaders use data collection systems to provide sub-sets of the data to scrutinise the progress of different groups of students, and this is helpful to identify trends.

Overall, partnerships use their data systems beneficially to identify students who are struggling. In a few instances, partnerships are also using this information to make in-year adaptations to programmes to consolidate students' learning.

Where partnerships have collected a summary of data outcomes, this provides a useful baseline for the partnership to analyse trends over time. However, overall, the collection of data and information about student progress is too unwieldy, and partnerships have not considered well enough what they need to know about students' standards and progress to plan effectively for improvement. Generally, data systems are being used as a repository, rather than the information being analysed to identify patterns of achievement, to inform planning for improvement, or to provide the partnership with an effective way to measure progress against key strategic priorities.



Most partnerships collect evidence against the QTS Standards to create an overview of students' achievement in their school experience. This provides a helpful general picture of students' progress. However, because the Standards are written as broad statements that are intended to be used in a more holistic way, mapping progress

against particular aspects of students' progress, such as lesson planning is difficult. Simply charting progress against each standard or groups of standards does not provide the most helpful information to identify patterns in achievement, and inform planning for improvement. A few partnerships identify specific areas for development in students' progress such as skills of critical analysis and research skills, and this enables leaders to track progress more precisely.

All partnerships are developing helpful electronic systems to bring together students' reflections on their progress, mentor and tutor evaluations, assignment feedback and other evidence of progress such as audit information. The students' Professional Learning Passports (PLP) are an important part of this system, and partnerships are working productively with the Education Workforce Council (EWC) to ensure that they develop a version of the PLP that supports students' progress well. In the most effective cases, partnership leaders scrutinise the range of information collected in the PLPs that indicate students' progress to find patterns of strengths, weaknesses, misconceptions, or differences between placements. However, partnerships are still developing efficient and effective systems to analyse this wealth of information. Furthermore, work to ensure that all mentors and tutors evaluate students' progress accurately and consistently is at an early stage of development. This is in part because the partnerships are working with a relatively new set of Standards for QTS (which were introduced in ITE to coincide with the start of the newly accredited programmes in September 2019). During the pandemic there have been few opportunities to work with partnership staff, particularly across partnership schools, to ensure that there is a common understanding of how to assess students' progress against the Standards. As a result, partnership leaders have not had a secure platform from which to make judgements about students' progress, or from which to develop approaches to mentor development. Many partnerships are developing approaches to work with the Standards. For example, In Yr Athrofa Professional Learning Partnership, leaders are exploring ways to judge students' progress more holistically. The CaBan partnership is undertaking valuable research on student progression, to identify typical behaviours at certain points of a novice teacher's development. This has informed the partnership's mentor guidance and provided helpful descriptors for students' progress.

### **Preparing students to teach the Curriculum for Wales**

All programmes of ITE in Wales are designed with a clear rationale based on curriculum reform in Wales. They provide students with a beneficial overview of the current educational landscape in Wales and all students have appropriate opportunities to develop their understanding of the key features of the Curriculum for Wales. Modules on the taught programmes, tasks and assignments help students to consider aspects such as the four purposes, the areas of learning and experience and the progression steps.

Each partnership is beginning to draw on its strengths to support students' understanding of important aspects pedagogy and practice. In the Swansea University Schools Partnership, students have worthwhile opportunities to explore the cultural context of Wales and develop their language skills through strong links to the Academi Hywel Teifi. CaBan benefits from its partnership with the regional consortium by taking advantage of the training opportunities for curriculum reform provided by the region. Staff in a few partnerships have played important roles in the

national development of the Curriculum for Wales, and have contributed their knowledge and understanding to the planning and delivery of ITE programmes. Furthermore, partnerships are becoming increasingly involved in research to support curriculum development, for example as part of the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (NSERE).

A few partnerships have explored cross-phase working with their students to enhance their understanding of fundamental elements of the curriculum such as the cross curricular themes. Primary and secondary student teachers working in mixed groups learn from each other's experiences and have valuable opportunities to investigate various teaching approaches. In addition, ITE staff in many of the HEIs work across primary and secondary programmes, and this is helping to create worthwhile links across modules that benefit students to understand the principle of a unified curriculum. All partnerships include opportunities for students to explore planning for the cross curricular skills. In the University of South Wales Partnership, a particular strength is the provision to develop students' digital pedagogy skills, and digital teaching and learning are integrated across the programme. However, in a few partnerships, students do not have a good enough understanding of effective planning for literacy and numeracy across the curriculum, especially on secondary programmes. There is a tendency to 'tick off' the inclusion of literacy and numeracy in lesson plans, rather than to develop an understanding of the progressive development of pupils' skills.

In a few partnerships, students have worthwhile opportunities to develop their understanding of curriculum design and development. For example, in the Open University Partnership, students investigate international curricular and compare these to the Curriculum for Wales. However, overall, students do not gain a good enough understanding of curriculum models, or of the fundamentals of planning across phases and subjects.

Although partnerships have provided students with opportunities to explore the features of the new curriculum, they are facing several challenges in preparing students in their readiness to teach the Curriculum for Wales.

This is partly because programme design was carried out in the early stages of the national developments of the Curriculum for Wales so not all aspects align well enough to the current national position. In some instances, students' learning experiences, especially on PGCEs where time is constrained by the short length of the programme, are too disjointed. This is particularly the case in the integration of university and school-based studies. Overall, opportunities for students to develop their understanding of the new curriculum have been hindered by the restrictions of the pandemic, both in terms of schools' progress in curriculum development, and in the limitations placed on students and staff in schools. As a result, students' exposure to effective curriculum design and delivery is too variable and the theory and practice underpinning the new curriculum are not reinforced sufficiently through the alignment of school and university experiences.

COVID-19 limitations have also created a barrier for partnerships in their key developmental stages to ensure that schools in the partnership are offering the most effective experiences for student teachers. Restrictions have meant that partnerships have not quality assured school experiences thoroughly enough. In addition,

consortium partners have not been able to provide sufficient intelligence about where there is effective practice for the Curriculum for Wales. In a very few instances, schools in the partnership do not provide a good model of curriculum development. Some of these schools are in challenging circumstances and are dealing with important improvement issues in leadership and teaching. In these schools, students do not have sufficient opportunities to observe good practice in planning and teaching, or to become involved in the work to develop the new curriculum.

A further consequence of the early design of the programmes in the time line of curriculum development is that misconceptions around curriculum design and delivery remain in both the school and university based components of the programmes. In some cases, this has resulted in a lack of focus on subject or phase specific pedagogies, assumptions about curriculum design (for example that all teaching will take place thematically) or misguided notions about lesson planning (for example specifying which of the four purposes are to be achieved or identifying the progression steps covered in a lesson). Partnerships have benefited from working with schools that have a strong track record in relation to curriculum reform. However, in some partnerships, the planning of programmes is underpinned by an assumption that either the university or school holds the expertise on curriculum design and delivery. As a result, partners do not work closely enough together to develop a clear understanding of what is effective practice. Furthermore, partnerships have not engaged regularly enough with professional learning provided by the consortia for the Curriculum for Wales.

### **How well the programmes blend theory and practice in linking school and university learning**

In all partnerships, lead schools worked together effectively with their university partners to co-construct the ITE programmes. They designed the programmes from the starting point of focusing on their complementary roles, considering how schools and the university might draw upon the best of their practice. This collaboration



meant that the blend of theory and practice was at the inception of each programme. In the most effective cases, this close working relationship has continued to maintain this focus.

Unfortunately, the restrictions of the pandemic meant that partnerships had to reconsider the timing of programme content and delivery. Due to the uncertainties surrounding students' access to schools, all partnerships redesigned their programmes to 'front-load' them with academic and theoretical study.

In each partnership, the lead schools play an important role in linking theory to practice. Even where gathering groups of students in school became unsafe, lead schools adapted their delivery to provide online sessions for students. These schools, through the school-led taught sessions, are developing their practice well and school-based staff are beginning to reconceptualise their role as teacher educators. In the best examples, programme content is aligned well to ensure that the school-led sessions allow students to reflect on their university sessions and their reading to explore aspects of pedagogy in practice in the lead school. In some lead schools, involvement in ITE is having a positive impact on the learning culture of the school, and students and mentors talk about learning alongside one another.

Students' understanding of the links between theory and practice is working most effectively where there is clear communication between the university and partnership schools. In the best examples, schools have a good understanding of the structure of the whole programme, the programme content and when it is covered. This means that school staff can support and challenge students to see the connections between educational research and school practice. Some partnerships have helpful structures to facilitate the flow of information between university and schools. For example, in the University of South Wales Partnership, schools are organised into 'Communities of Learning', where one lead school works closely with a small group of network schools. This enables the group of schools to support students to make connections to university learning, and also to share ideas across the community and help students to link theory to their own teaching.

In the best examples, mentors draw upon their knowledge of the programme to tailor feedback to their students. They encourage students to reflect on educational theory when discussing progress in their teaching with them and make pertinent references to key texts when providing written feedback to students. Generally, however, staff in the broader network of schools do not have a good enough understanding of the programme content to support students to make links to theory when reflecting on their teaching.

The school-led days work best when students come to the sessions well prepared, having completed tasks and reading activities that help them to maximise their learning.

Many partnerships have designed a helpful range of assessment tasks for students that help them to make the links between theory and their experiences in school. Students find that enquiry tasks, where they are required to reflect on evidence they have gathered in school in the light of relevant reading, are most effective in developing their understanding. However, a majority of students still regard their academic assignments as a necessity to pass the programme, rather than a way to



enhance their knowledge, skills and understanding of teaching. In some cases, this is because the partnership does not consider the timing or nature of assignments well enough to help students to make the connection between theory and practice.

### **The development of research practice in university and schools and how this impacts on student teachers' standards**

All partnerships have a clear strategy to develop research and enquiry across the partnership. They have appropriate aims to ensure that the partnership builds the research capacity of the university in terms of ITE, support school partners to develop their research skills and promote the engagement of student teachers in wider reading and professional enquiry. They have a strategic group or work-stream related to developing research across the partnership. This work is helping to foster a thriving research culture within partnerships and across ITE in Wales. A few partnerships work beneficially in collaboration with other partners and are beginning to impact on enquiry practice across the partnership. For example, the CaBan Partnership is beginning to work productively with Bangor University's Collaborative Institute for Education Research, Evidence and Impact (which includes the regional consortium) to make a positive contribution to the research culture of the partnership's schools. A few partnerships are developing ways in which university staff might work with schools to promote and support scholarly activity. For example, in the Aberystwyth Partnership, tutors are supporting research activity in around half of the partnership's schools, working on specific projects such as work to develop pupils' oracy skills.

The partnerships are increasingly involved in national and international research work, increasing the profile of ITE in Wales in research engagement. This also enables staff to work with schools and universities beyond the partnership to increase their knowledge and understanding of current educational issues. University-based staff in some partnerships are also engaging in research into their own ITE provision, such as cohort studies and enquiry into the effectiveness of aspects of practice. This research is beginning to inform the development of the programmes valuably.

Many universities have made significant investment in building the research skills of staff, including support to gain doctoral qualifications. Many partnerships are enabling school ITE staff to undertake mentoring qualifications, some of which are at masters' level. In a few partnerships, school staff take on a role specifically designed to support research and enquiry. For example, in the Cardiff Partnership, each lead school has a 'Research Champion'. The champions, who have been trained in research methods, support students to engage with research to develop their pedagogy. They facilitate collaboration and enquiry opportunities for students to help them to relate their research to real life contexts, such as priorities from the school's improvement plan.

Generally, tutors and mentors are supporting students more usefully with developing their research skills. Across partnerships, there is a more structured approach to developing students' research, supported by a wider understanding of research practice, and a stronger promotion of current research. A few tutors and mentors are beginning to use their own research to inform their teaching and, where this

happens, students benefit valuably from this engagement with new ideas and with perceiving research and enquiry as part of life-long professional learning.

This work represents a 'culture shift' in ITE in Wales and is already having a positive impact in practice in both university and schools.

### **The joint leadership of the partnership**

All partnerships demonstrate a commitment to collaboration and are built upon a genuine desire to work together to support ITE reform in Wales. Partners initially came together to co-construct the vision, structures and content of the new programmes, and working relationships between partners are maturing as the provision develops. Lead schools have shown a notable commitment to the partnership. They demonstrate a sense of purpose and ownership of their role in developing teachers of the future.



All partnerships have clear leadership structures. Generally, leadership is organised into three levels, with a strategic board driving the partnership, a management group working below the board, and several sub-groups who lead the work in specific priority areas. All partnerships have carefully considered the membership of each leadership group so that there is appropriate representation from all partners. Partnerships are beginning to develop lines of accountability through the leadership structures. However, in a few instances, roles and responsibilities are not clear. The sub-groups generally have appropriate terms of reference and increase the capacity of the partnership to steer work in important areas such as wellbeing and research. However, the work of such sub-groups does not draw on sufficient a range of evidence to direct its work precisely enough. Furthermore, in a few partnerships, there is too little emphasis on developing students' learning experiences.

Self-evaluation processes tend to be led by the university partner. School representatives are beginning to develop their role on leadership groups to examine the findings from self-evaluation and to identify actions for improvement, but this work is at an early stage of development.

All partnerships have a suitable calendar of self-evaluation activities and regular opportunities for reflection on the quality of the programme and student outcomes. They collect suitable data and information to help the partnership to consider its strengths and areas for development. Student voice plays an important part in this evidence gathering. Although this generates a great deal of useful information, partnerships, in general, do not triangulate this well enough with other evidence. Overall, self-evaluation and planning for improvement processes are not sharp enough, particularly at identifying specifically enough what needs to improve in teaching and learning experiences. They do not account for the full range of the partnership's work, in schools and in university.

## Appendix

### Questions for consideration

#### Monitoring students' progress over the duration of their programme

- How can we be sure of the robustness of the data that we collect?
- How can we ensure that all mentors and tutors judge students' progress fairly and accurately?
- How can we make sure that our data collection is efficient and effective (are we collecting too much information, or information that is too broad to be useful?)
- How can we best collect data that tells us about students' progress in the most important aspects of their development?
- How can we work with the Standards for QTS most effectively to support students' progress and to provide information to improve our provision?
- Do we analyse the data and information that we collect sufficiently to draw out important messages about student progress and provision?
- Does the data and information we collect help us to identify specifically enough the areas for improvement in teaching, mentoring, programme content and delivery?
- What does the data and information that we collect tell us about how well we are reaching our priorities as a partnership?
- How can we use the data and information that we collect more strategically?

#### How well the programmes prepare students to teach Curriculum for Wales?

- How can we best help students to gain a good understanding of curriculum design and development?...for phase and subject?
- Is there a consistently strong enough understanding of the Curriculum for Wales across staff in university and schools?
- Where is there best practice in aspects of preparing for the Curriculum for Wales in our partner schools?
- How can we work with consortium partners to support staff and students more effectively?
- How can we ensure that students have equitable experiences to gain an understanding of the Curriculum for Wales?
- How can we align elements of our taught programme more effectively to develop students' experience of curriculum requirements?
- How can we best communicate with our mentors to ensure that mentors can make pertinent connections between the taught programme and supporting students on school experience?
- Do our students have enough opportunity to develop their phase and subject specific pedagogies?
- How well do students develop their knowledge of cross curricular skills to improve the way in which they plan for and teach these aspects? In particular, do they have a deep enough understanding of literacy and numeracy?
- How well are students supported to understand unhelpful misconceptions relating to Curriculum for Wales?

## **How well the programme blend theory and practice in linking school and university learning?**

- Is the programme structured so that students develop their knowledge and understanding in the most helpful way to develop their teaching?
- Do staff in all schools have a good enough understanding of programme design and content to make timely connections for their students between theory and practice?
- How can we design assignments and tasks that help students to explore the links between theory and practice?
- Do our students have enough opportunities to explore theory and practice to support the development of their phase and subject pedagogies?
- How well do we develop students' skills to evaluate their own practice?
- Are students given enough opportunities to explore the connections between theory and practice when on school experience?
- Are students provided with effective opportunities to use their knowledge of effective teaching and learning to evaluate their own teaching and improve planning and practice?

## **The development of research practice in university and schools and how this impacts on student teachers' standards?**

- How can we gain a full picture of research and enquiry activity across the partnership?
- Is our research strategy understood clearly across the partnership?
- How can we best share our research to benefit students? The partnership? ITE developments in Wales?
- How well do tutors and mentors use research-informed approaches to develop students' subject and pedagogical knowledge? How do we know?
- How well do tutors, mentors and students work together to develop research knowledge through communities of enquiry?
- Do all partnership staff have a good understanding of the research behaviours and dispositions that we wish to develop in our students?

## **The joint leadership between the university and its partner schools**

- Is our vision clear, comprehensive, well understood and shared effectively? Does it run through all of our work?
- Are all roles and responsibilities clear? How will we review these to ensure that they are appropriate and effective?
- How well developed are our quality assurance systems? How do we hold one another to account?
- How sharp, useful and strategic are our self-evaluation and planning for improvement processes? Do we identify precisely what needs to improve and design smart action plans to address these issues?
- How valid, reliable and comprehensive is the information that feeds the data in our self-evaluation system? How well do partners triangulate and interrogate this data?
- Are all partners involved in our self-evaluation processes?

- How involved are all partners in ensuring that actions for improvement are undertaken in an effective and timely way?