A report on


The Open University

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by

Estyn, His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education

and Training in Wales


This report is also available in Welsh

## About The Open University

The Open University Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Partnership consists of The Open University and The Open University in Wales, working in partnership with a range of partners: the Welsh Government, local authorities, six lead schools and 325 partner schools situated across Wales. At the University, ITE sits within the School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport.

The partnership provides one programme of ITE with four pathways, accredited by the Education Workforce Council (EWC) from April 2020:

- PGCE (Wales), Salaried Route (Primary)
- PGCE (Wales), Part-time Route (Primary)
- PGCE (Wales), Salaried Route (Secondary)
- PGCE (Wales), Part-time Route (Secondary)

On the salaried route, students study alongside their existing school duties as part of their full-time employment in a primary or secondary school. On the part-time route, students study while working in part-time employment or around other life commitments. Each route into teaching follows a distance learning model, that combines independent study of online materials with live seminars, and periods of practical in-school experience.

The programme is a two-year postgraduate programme and can be studied in either Welsh or English. On the PGCE secondary pathway, student teachers can study one of the following subjects: science, mathematics, Welsh, English, English with drama, English with media, design and technology, or computing/ICT.

There are 65 students following the PGCE Primary salaried route, of whom 16 are taking the course through the medium of Welsh. There are 71 students on the part-time PGCE Primary with four studying through the medium of Welsh. On the PGCE Secondary salaried pathway, there are 88 student teachers, with 40 studying through the medium of Welsh. The PGCE Secondary part-time route has 14 students, with one taking the course through the medium of Welsh.

The Welsh Government funds the PGCE programme as part of the Employment Based Teacher Training Scheme.

## Summary

The Open University Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Partnership in Wales offers a distinctive and inclusive route into the teaching profession, underpinned by a strong commitment to social justice. Established in April 2020, the partnership has developed within a particularly challenging period for education, that included the COVID-19 pandemic. As a relatively new partnership, it is evolving, with leaders keen to act on feedback to improve provision.

The programme's curriculum offers well-structured opportunities for students to integrate theory with practice through blended and distance learning. Curriculum for Wales features prominently in taught units and school-based tasks. University tutors foster a safe and supportive online learning environment. They know their students well, and use a range of suitable approaches to encourage and engage them. However, support from tutors and mentors in helping students link theory with classroom practice, or to reflect on their prior learning, is inconsistent in quality. As a result, student teachers' ability to reflect critically on research, their teaching and its impact on pupil progress, is underdeveloped.

Many student teachers make secure progress, with a few salaried primary students achieving particularly well. In general, students develop strong classroom management skills, apply appropriate teaching strategies, and produce high-quality resources. Nonetheless, around half struggle to identify clear objectives for pupils' learning, and a few have important gaps in their subject knowledge and pedagogical understanding. While students demonstrate strong digital competence, make sound progress in numeracy and develop their Welsh language skills well, frequent writing errors undermine their effectiveness as literacy role models.

In the main, student teachers demonstrate high levels of professionalism and resilience. A positive culture of well-being and inclusion ensures that most students feel well supported by university staff and mentors. Tailored provision and support for neurodiverse students, LGBTQ+ student teachers and those from global majority backgrounds contributes positively to the student experience. The partnership uses its monitoring systems well to identify and support students in need.

Although most students benefit from supportive working relationships with mentors and tutors, the quality of mentoring varies widely. While many students receive helpful guidance, a minority do not benefit from feedback that clearly identifies areas for improvement in their teaching or academic work. Programme design, teaching and mentoring do not take good enough account of students' diverse starting points. Training for mentors focuses primarily on procedural matters and does not prepare them well enough to support students with varied backgrounds. Consequently, progress tends to be

more inconsistent among secondary student teachers, and those on the part-time routes (primary and secondary) make less sustained progress overall.

Leadership across the partnership is characterised by a clear strategic vision, a collaborative ethos and an ambition to innovate in ITE. There are suitable governance structures, and lead schools play a significant role in shaping programme delivery. The development of a research culture is a notable feature of the partnership's emerging identity. Enquiry into classroom practice is embedded within the PGCE programme, and the appointment of a research fellow has resulted in effective strategic leadership of this area.

As the partnership has grown, it has reviewed its processes and systems. However, communication across the partnership is not yet effective, and there is too much variation in how well schools understand programme expectations. The quality assurance of school-based experiences and mentoring lacks consistency and rigour. The partnership does not gather, or use, first-hand evidence comprehensively to inform self-evaluation and improvement planning. Neither does it hold those with responsibility for supporting student teachers or monitoring quality, to account well enough. This contributes to shortcomings in around half of mentoring and the limited progress of a few students.

## Recommendations

R1    Strengthen strategic leadership, self-evaluation and quality assurance, with a particular focus on the effective use of first-hand evidence to inform improvement

R2    Improve the quality and consistency of mentoring across the partnership, including strengthening communication between schools and the university

R3    Improve student teachers' understanding of effective pedagogy, their planning, critical reflection and personal writing skills

R4    Refine programme design to better support student progress and engagement

R5    Improve the accuracy and effectiveness of tutor and mentor assessment

## What happens next

The partnership will draw up an action plan showing how it will address the recommendations from the inspection. Estyn will review the partnership's progress in a year's time.

## Main findings

### Learning

Many students on all programmes make sound progress towards becoming qualified teachers. A few students on the salaried PGCE primary programme make particularly strong progress and achieve very well. On the PGCE secondary programmes, progress tends to be more variable. Students on the part-time route, across both primary and secondary programmes, generally make less sustained progress during their two years of study. Across all programmes, a few students make only limited progress and require considerable support from university tutors and school-based mentors to achieve Qualified Teacher Status (QTS).

Across all programmes, students develop secure knowledge of most curriculum requirements in Wales. During online university sessions, a few students in primary and secondary programmes, display genuine curiosity and enthusiasm when exploring Curriculum for Wales. These students think deeply about how teaching and learning experiences might best support pupils to become successful learners and citizens.

During the two-year programme, many student teachers develop secure knowledge of the subjects and age phases they are preparing to teach. They make appropriate links between well-being and pupils' capacity to learn and make progress. A few students, however, do not have a sound enough understanding of effective pedagogy and there are important gaps in their subject knowledge. While primary students generally have a better grasp of how to plan and deliver areas of learning and experience than their secondary peers, their knowledge of how to teach reading effectively is not developed well enough.

In general, most students have a secure understanding of the lesson planning process. They plan suitably for a sequence of learning experiences and often consider how to make pupils' learning relevant to their school context and local area. Many students take appropriate account of pupils' prior knowledge and understanding. They anticipate potential misconceptions pupils may have and consider how they might address these during lessons. A majority identify relevant vocabulary and prepare helpful questions to support pupils' learning. A few primary student teachers show notable strengths in planning for pupils' progress over time. In these instances, students know their pupils very well and think carefully about how to meet their individual needs. They apply what they have learned from reading and their own classroom research to inform their practice, for instance when designing imaginative environmental projects that make purposeful links across curriculum areas. These stimulating experiences not only support pupils to develop a broad range of subject and cross-curricular skills, they also help to nurture pupils' sense of 'cynefin' (belonging).

Most students recognise that the 'four purposes' underpin whole-school curriculum design. However, a common misunderstanding, reinforced by the lesson plan template they use, leads them to identify specific 'purposes' as outcomes of individual lessons, rather than understanding that these represent overarching goals for learners' development. While many students plan suitable learning experiences appropriate for pupils' ages, around half struggle to define clear and precise learning objectives or success criteria. These students write objectives that are too broad or describe the activities that pupils will complete, rather than the intended learning. As a result, they find it difficult to assess pupils' progress, reflect on their teaching or plan effectively for future learning.

In their 'practice learning' schools, nearly all student teachers interact positively with pupils and most use humour appropriately to help foster a positive climate for learning. They develop successful strategies to manage pupils' behaviour well, establish effective classroom routines and, in the few best instances, organise the classroom in ways that promote pupils' independent learning. Students often produce high-quality, age-appropriate resources that engage pupils and support their progress. A few students on the primary pathway have an exceptionally well-developed understanding of how pupils learn. They are confident in adapting their teaching, for example when moving from working with older primary pupils to the youngest classes. They respond flexibly to pupils' interests and ideas, such as providing nursery children with ingredients when they spontaneously ask to make their own dough, and then supporting them to use mathematical language while measuring.

Overall, many students use a range of effective teaching approaches, balancing direct, whole-class teaching with opportunities for pupils to work in pairs and groups on practical activities and discussion tasks. In the best examples, students think creatively about how to introduce new concepts to pupils and use 'hooks', such as images, film and music, to capture their interest at the beginning of lessons. Many communicate effectively by providing clear instructions and explanations, and model good use of spoken language for pupils. A few students manage the work of other adults capably and have a compelling classroom presence.

During their teaching inputs and when monitoring progress throughout a lesson, many students use questioning appropriately to check pupils' understanding of what they learn. Generally, they support pupils suitably during their activities, for instance by offering further guidance or providing relevant examples. However, a majority of students do not make effective use of success criteria to help pupils recognise how well they are progressing, or draw on a wide enough range of questions to deepen pupils' thinking. A minority struggle to balance personalised support for individual pupils with maintaining a clear overview of the whole class. This is often because, during planning, they do not

consider carefully enough how they will support and challenge different groups of pupils to make progress.

At times, because students have not specified a clear focus for learning and their expectations of what pupils can achieve are too low, a few find it difficult to motivate pupils. Consequently, the pace of teaching slows, their questioning lacks purpose and pupils become passive. In a few cases, the activities students plan are frequently too easy and not sufficiently engaging, meaning that they struggle to meet pupils' learning needs well enough.

Nearly all students recognise the importance of developing pupils' cross-curricular skills of literacy, numeracy and digital competence, and a majority do so appropriately during their school experience. Students' own digital skills are a strength and their numeracy skills are sound. Although, in general, students write with reasonable clarity in their language of study (Welsh or English), they often make errors in spelling, grammar and sentence construction. This affects their ability to model strong writing skills in the classroom.

Most students, whose first language is Welsh, speak with suitable accuracy and use formal, subject-specific terminology confidently, for example when discussing educational issues in seminars. They model the Welsh language effectively during lessons. Overall, most students make appropriate progress in developing their Welsh skills from their starting points, but a minority miss opportunities to support pupils' Welsh language development in lessons.

In their online university sessions, many students engage appropriately, participating in discussions and contributing written responses through the messaging or chat features provided. A few also ask pertinent questions of staff from lead partnership schools, who deliver lectures to the whole cohort. Students find seminars particularly valuable when tutors provide opportunities for them to reflect on their school experiences and share these with their peers in smaller groups. In these settings, many students discuss their successes and challenges confidently, but they rarely make explicit links between their experiences and relevant educational theory or ideas.

In a minority of sessions where tutors provide effective support for students' critical thinking, students raise thoughtful topics for discussion, informed by their classroom observations or academic reading. For example, English secondary students reflect on how pedagogical approaches observed in subjects other than the one in which they are training to teach, might be adapted and applied in their own practice.

Most students make appropriate use of online independent study units, although the extent to which they do so varies considerably. In a minority of instances, where engagement is strongest, students are well prepared for their seminars and lectures, and

they draw effectively on their reading to support their practice-based learning activities. Students respond particularly positively to these structured tasks. Many engage conscientiously with topics they consider relevant to their development, such as gaining a better understanding of pupils with additional learning needs in their classes.

In their academic assignments, most students make suitable use of a broad range of up-to-date texts, for example, to support their understanding of research methodology. They refer appropriately to Welsh educational policy and context. A few students demonstrate strong skills in synthesising and analysing research findings. They evaluate different perspectives and write with suitable formality. Many students show an awareness of a range of research methods and recognise the importance of collecting and analysing data. Primary students often identify practical research projects that align well with their teaching or aspects of school improvement relevant to their settings. However, a notable proportion of secondary students do not select a research focus that is pertinent to their development as teachers. In general, they do not explore data collection and analysis in enough depth, nor critique sources with sufficient rigour. A majority also struggle to structure their written work in a way that presents a coherent and a well-reasoned argument.

## Well-being and attitudes to learning:

Overall, most student teachers are proactive and highly self-motivated. Nearly all conduct themselves well in line with school and programme expectations. They demonstrate high levels of professionalism, work well with others, and actively seek support and advice when needed. Most student teachers are punctual and attend taught sessions regularly.

Generally, even though many student teachers are balancing work and family commitments, they apply their organisational skills well to manage their workload. A majority of students appreciate the support they receive from their peers, such as through online chat groups that help to build informal support networks and create a sense of community. However, a few student teachers, particularly those following the part-time route or in small secondary subject groups, feel more isolated, especially when they are the only student in their placement school. Overall, the extent to which student teachers collaborate with their peers based in other schools is limited, mainly due to lack of structured opportunities to do so.

Most student teachers have built very strong working relationships with their mentors and other school staff, and they appreciate the beneficial support provided for their well-being. Many student teachers feel that they receive suitable advice on how to stay healthy and safe in university and school, and most feel safe and free from harassment. They know whom to turn to, in school and at university, should they require help or guidance.

Most student teachers collaborate well with school-based staff and, where appropriate, they attend meetings and other whole-school activities, which they value. Many take advantage of opportunities to engage in school improvement projects or to assist with after-school activities. A majority develop their leadership skills suitably with a few taking on valuable additional responsibilities, such as leading aspects of whole-school curriculum planning and sharing their learning with others in staff training sessions. In the few strongest examples, this is beginning to have a positive influence on pupils' learning and well-being beyond the student teachers' own classrooms. For example, they help to influence approaches to foundation learning and provision in their schools, such as developing a sensory room for younger pupils with additional learning needs.

Many student teachers reflect appropriately on their progress with their mentors and, in many instances, have a secure understanding of their own emerging strengths and areas for development. However, the extent to which student teachers engage critically in reflecting on their teaching through dialogue with tutors and mentors, or in their written evaluations, is too variable. They rarely make links between their classroom practice and their learning about educational theory or ideas. Too often, they do not focus deeply enough on analysing the impact of their planning and teaching on pupils' learning. This means that, overall, most students' critical reflection skills are at an early stage of development.

Most student teachers demonstrate positive attitudes towards their engagement in practice learning activities and assessment tasks. A few benefit considerably from their involvement in research projects. They recognise how such opportunities can broaden their development, for example to engage with innovative classroom practices, work collaboratively with a range of school practitioners, or to engage with parents successfully.

Students respond appropriately to the partnership's systems for gathering their feedback, for instance, by completing module evaluations and sharing their views during seminars. Members of the 'Senedd Fach' represent their peers appropriately through regular student voice meetings. They have a positive influence on aspects of the programme, such as improving the timetabling of university-based sessions for part-time students at the beginning of their study.

Most student teachers have a good understanding of their professional responsibilities as teachers. They understand their role in supporting pupil well-being, and how schools support a culture of safety. While many have a secure understanding of school child protection procedures, and know how to respond appropriately, a few are less clear about their responsibilities to help keep pupils safe from the risk of radicalisation.

**Teaching and learning experiences:**

The Open University PGCE programme in Wales offers well-considered and distinctive learning experiences for student teachers. The programme is underpinned by a clear and research-informed conceptual framework and is shaped by a strong commitment to widening access to the teaching profession. The partnership has designed appropriate blended and distance learning approaches to enable students to engage flexibly with academic and practical learning experiences. However, the programme design for the first year of study does not take strong enough account of student teachers' different experiences and starting points.

A key feature of the programme is its spiral curriculum model, through which students revisit key themes as they move from familiarisation to consolidation. This approach provides useful opportunities for students to revisit and deepen their understanding of key concepts over time. The partnership has implemented a rolling 'maintenance' review process to ensure that curriculum content remains aligned with the latest educational policies, up-to-date research, and emerging trends identified through student assessments and progress reviews. Tutors sequence modules with clear links between theory and practice, to provide opportunities for students to build their confidence in applying research and policy in real classroom contexts. However, in a few instances, the connections between educational theory and practice do not sufficiently address key aspects of teaching and learning. For example, the programme's curriculum does not support student teachers well enough to develop a secure understanding of effective approaches to developing pupils' reading skills.

The programme's curriculum is enriched further through its practice learning activities, which aim to blend research and practice in ways that help students to apply theoretical knowledge meaningfully in the classroom. These activities provide student teachers with hands-on opportunities to engage in beneficial school-based enquiry tasks. Examples include developing pupils' numeracy through outdoor learning and using artificial intelligence to support their digital skills. Students value these tasks as a means of experimenting with new strategies and gathering evidence that informs their professional development as teachers.

The programme provides a range of high-quality online materials, supported by live seminars and lectures. Online study units include engaging multimedia resources, practical examples with exemplar videos of teaching, and useful summaries of academic research. These materials support student teachers to consider their learning in relation to their classroom practice. For example, tasks such as 'reverse planning' help students to think about the skills, knowledge and teaching approaches needed to help pupils achieve an overall learning goal. However, in a few instances, study units contain too much

content, which hinders student teachers' ability to complete tasks, or engage meaningfully in reflecting on their progress.

Seminars are generally well designed to develop students' understanding of effective approaches to teaching. In the best examples, they promote active discussion, challenge student teachers to engage critically with pedagogical issues, and create space to address misconceptions. In the majority of seminars where these opportunities are available, students value the chance to engage in professional discussions. They appreciate how these sessions deepen their thinking, encourage wider reading, and inspire them to explore new approaches to teaching and learning.

The partnership provides appropriate school experiences across age phases and settings. Nearly all student teachers benefit from placements in different year groups, helping them to understand effective approaches to teaching and how pupils progress at different stages in their learning. However, in general, there is too much variability in the quality of experiences students receive in their second placement school, which limits the overall benefit of this part of their training. The structure of the part-time programme, which often includes more fragmented placement experiences, also makes it more challenging to ensure continuity in teaching development for these students.

The support provided for developing students' lesson planning is appropriate, with structured templates introduced early in the programme. These templates mostly offer a valuable scaffold that, when used well, helps students to develop their planning skills and begin to create sequences of lessons that support progression in pupils' learning.

The partnership is beginning to adopt useful approaches to help student teachers to develop their reflective skills. For example, students use an online platform to share recorded lessons with tutors, to discuss their strengths and areas for improvement. While this practice is at an early stage of development, in the few strongest cases, student teachers make regular use of these opportunities to reflect thoughtfully with mentors and tutors on the impact of their teaching on pupils' learning.

The programme has a clear and well-integrated focus on Curriculum for Wales. Student teachers explore curriculum design and cross-curricular skills through both taught units and school-based tasks. They are encouraged to reflect critically on how their experiences align with the values and expectations of the curriculum. Although the programme provides opportunities for tutors to address misconceptions during seminars, the consistency and quality of this support is variable. As a result, a few student teachers do not develop a sufficiently clear enough understanding of all key curriculum principles, such as the purpose of progression steps.

The partnership places a strong emphasis on developing students' Welsh language skills from their different starting points, through clear expectations, tailored support, and a range of structured and informal opportunities that reflect students' varying levels of proficiency. Provision for developing student teachers' literacy, numeracy, digital and language skills is appropriate. Online modules encourage students to reflect on their personal skills and understand how these relate to national frameworks for literacy, numeracy and digital competence. While additional support is available to help student teachers strengthen personal skills, such as academic writing, this does not have a strong enough impact on improving their ability to write accurately and effectively.

Nearly all tutors and mentors build strong, supportive working relationships with student teachers, creating a positive environment, that fosters trust and confidence. They demonstrate genuine enthusiasm and a clear commitment to helping student teachers to succeed.

Many tutors and mentors demonstrate suitable subject and phase knowledge, and, in a few instances, they share valuable, real-life examples from their own experiences during taught sessions. A majority of tutors support student teachers appropriately to make relevant connections between educational theory and practice. Generally, tutors' knowledge and understanding of the approaches, strategies and principles used to prepare student teachers effectively for the profession and how these relate to distance learning contexts, is variable.

Overall, tutors plan and deliver taught sessions and seminars appropriately. Many use an appropriate range of resources and distance learning strategies to engage students and encourage participation in taught sessions. In the best examples, sessions have clear aims that help to build student teachers' knowledge and understanding progressively over time. Contributions from lead partnership schools provide students with a few helpful opportunities to broaden their insight into school-based practice, for instance in relation to Curriculum for Wales. However, in a minority of cases, tutors and mentors do not encourage student teachers to reflect meaningfully on their prior learning and experiences, or take full advantage of opportunities to explore themes and academic theories that challenge students' critical thinking.

Tutors and mentors use an appropriate range of approaches to assess students' achievements and progress. Assessment tasks are relevant and support student teachers' development appropriately. Tutors assess students' assignment submissions diligently, providing formative comments throughout the text, alongside a summary intended to support their learning and development. This written feedback is nearly always supportive, and overall, the assessment process is constructive. However, there is too much variation in the quality of tutors' written feedback. A minority of tutors' assessments

are overly generous, with a few praising students' subject and pedagogical knowledge, rather than identifying notable shortcomings in these areas. While many tutors set relevant targets that reflect their feedback commentary, there is not always alignment between the feedback and the grades awarded. In a minority of instances, tutors do not provide clear enough guidance to help students to improve their work. They overlook important shortcomings in students' literacy, such as weaknesses in sentence construction and writing style.

Nearly all mentors maintain positive relationships with student teachers during periods of practice learning and show care for their well-being. However, overall, the quality of mentoring is too variable across the partnership. This means not all student teachers have access to a high enough standard of support at such a crucial stage of their professional development. In a few cases, mentoring is highly beneficial to student teachers' development. It supports them to become reflective practitioners who evaluate their teaching by considering the difference their teaching makes to pupils' learning. Generally, mentoring of students on the salaried route is stronger and more effective than for those student teachers following the part-time route. Often, this is because the students on the salaried route have established sustained relationships with teachers in their place of work that support successful ongoing  professional development.

Around a half of mentors make accurate observations and evaluations. However, too often, they present an overly positive view of the quality of a student's teaching. In these instances, mentoring tends to focus narrowly on classroom management strategies, or simply describe what the student did in each stage of the lesson. While this is important, it is often at the expense of encouraging deeper reflection on the impact of the student's teaching on pupils' learning. Support for student teachers' lesson planning is inconsistent and mentors rarely discuss students' progress in, or provide specific support for, developing their evaluative skills.

Most mentors support student teachers to reflect appropriately on their progress towards agreed professional targets and set suitable goals for future lessons. A minority of mentors use the professional standards for teaching and leadership effectively in discussions, helping student teachers to gauge their progress. However, in a few cases, mentors provide limited guidance, offering little encouragement for students to discuss their next steps. Occasionally, targets are generic or unchanged over several weeks, limiting students' professional growth. Across programmes, mentors rarely make links between the university taught programme and the student teacher's practice. In a few instances, mentors' limited knowledge and understanding of a specific age phase or subject results in the reinforcement of inappropriate pedagogical approaches and missed opportunities to address student misconceptions.

**Care, support and guidance:**

The partnership provides a structured and supportive environment which helps student teachers to develop strong professional values. The programme builds most students' resilience successfully and develops their understanding of the core values and dispositions needed to be a teacher in Wales in the 21st century. Overall, the programme provides students with appropriate varied blended learning opportunities to engage with educational theory and practice, and to explore the place of research in developing effective classroom practice.

There is clear and practical guidance to develop student teachers' understanding of how to foster inclusive and respectful school communities. Students have access to valuable teaching resources that deepen their understanding of important issues, such as religious and racial discrimination, and support them in working with pupils from diverse backgrounds in a sensitive and empathetic manner. Regular updates, including weekly bulletins, offer purposeful advice to students to inform their classroom practice, for example when developing pupils' understanding of respect, dignity and children's rights.

As part of the ongoing development of its programmes, the partnership values student teacher feedback. It encourages student voice through mechanisms, such as the 'Senedd Fach', and uses this forum to make considered adjustments to aspects of the provision, including tutorial content and well-being support. For example, student 'Well-being Ambassadors' have contributed to the development of a well-being support pack and the student well-being handbook. As a result, student teachers have access to a range of resources created by, and for, students, that offer practical strategies for supporting well-being and maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

University staff support student teachers' well-being and progress in learning through well-considered systems that address a wide range of personal needs. They are responsive to the diverse nature of student cohorts and offer tailored support, including for those with additional learning needs. Specialist staff work successfully with individuals to develop action plans and implement appropriate adjustments, to ensure fair access to learning. Initiatives, such as, 'support cafés,' offer inclusive spaces for neurodiverse students, while the 'Diverse futures group' provides beneficial additional support for LGBTQ+ students and those from the global majority. These actions contribute positively to a learning environment that supports inclusion and well-being for students.

The partnership has developed a robust system to track student progress, and to provide timely interventions, for example, for those whose circumstances make them vulnerable to underachievement. Tutors use a range of data and student teacher information, including outcomes of students' practice learning experiences, samples of their lesson planning and mentor lesson observation forms, to monitor students' progress, well-being

and engagement as part of the 'student progress review' process. Tutors use this information purposefully during termly cohort review meetings to evaluate how well students are progressing on the course, and to identify any barriers to their achievement and journey towards QTS. However, currently the partnership does not examine the impact of mentoring on individual students' progress well enough, as part of the overall picture of their development.

Curriculum tutors make appropriate use of the partnership's 'skills review framework' to monitor student teachers' progress in developing their personal skills. They draw on evidence from student teachers' planning and evaluations to identify strengths and areas for improvement in literacy, numeracy and digital competence. The partnership also offers professional learning opportunities to support this development, including access to online resources. Most students find these resources helpful, particularly the skills audits, which guide them in identifying specific areas for improvement. However, a minority do not make effective use of the available literacy support to improve their writing.

Over time, the partnership has developed and refined its 'student support framework', to assist student teachers who are experiencing difficulties, such as challenges related to managing their professional behaviours and workload. University tutors, practice tutors and school coordinators use the framework effectively to identify individual student needs and set short-term targets for improvement. This process encourages student teachers to take ownership of their development by identifying the actions they need to take, considering who is involved and committing to timescales.

All curriculum and practice tutors receive training in well-being and mental health to support student teachers effectively. There is clear guidance for students on how to access university support services, alongside tutorials on workload management, mindfulness, and financial planning. Additional support is available through The Open University's support centre and its 24/7 online facility. The partnership's support for preparing students for induction arrangements as newly qualified teachers, or for making informed career choices, is less well developed.

Overall, the partnership between the university and practice learning schools provides strong pastoral support for students. Communication between students, mentors and curriculum tutors helps to ensure the successful monitoring of student welfare during placements. University tutors are accessible through drop-in sessions and regular check-ins, where they provide valuable one-to-one support. However, the programme does not currently offer structured opportunities for student teachers to collaborate with their peers in other schools. This limits opportunities for them to share experiences, discuss challenges and learn from each other's practice.

The partnership provides valuable opportunities for students to develop leadership skills, such as managing teaching assistants and contributing to whole-school professional learning. In the strongest examples, students enhance their personal and professional attributes by leading on aspects of school development, such as improving outdoor learning provision for younger pupils.

Overall, the university taught programme provides student teachers with appropriate opportunities to engage with a wide range of research and develop their knowledge of how enquiry-based learning can support effective classroom practice. The programme generally supports students to gain a suitable understanding of how to use data and performance information to support their action research. In the very few best examples, tutors effectively encourage students to critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of their research and its relevance to their day-to-day teaching. The annual research conference held towards the end of students' two years of study provides a valuable opportunity for a few students to share their findings with tutors, schools and each other, promoting professional engagement and reflection on teaching approaches. These students appreciate the chance to engage in professional scholarly activity and to publish research findings early in their careers.

The partnership promotes a culture of safeguarding, including safe recruitment practices for staff and student teachers. It has robust policies and procedures that comply with Welsh Government's statutory requirements and guidance. During the inspection, the team identified a very few aspects of safeguarding that required strengthening. These have been resolved swiftly and comprehensively. The partnership's arrangements give no cause for concern.

There are appropriate procedures for monitoring students' attendance during university sessions and school-based experiences. The partnership is beginning to track cohort attendance purposefully to identify trends in absences over time to inform its self-evaluation.

**Leadership and management:**

The partnership has a clear and well-articulated rationale for its involvement in initial teacher education, aligning strongly with its civic mission and commitment to social justice. This commitment is reflected in its ambition to diversify the teaching workforce and to address subject-specific shortages in teacher recruitment. Schools are supportive of the partnership's mission to widen access to the profession. Those that support students on the salaried route value the opportunity to enable their staff to pursue a teaching career.

The Director of ITE has embraced the challenge of developing new routes for training teachers in Wales and is building a committed team to support this work. Reflecting this commitment, the partnership engages well with local authorities and school leaders to promote ITE pathways. The director has introduced a range of valuable systems to support leadership and improvement, and responds proactively to external feedback. Her efforts are helping to foster an ethos of mutual trust, which is beginning to strengthen leadership capacity across the partnership.

The partnership engages well with national priorities, including widening access, the development of the Welsh language, and increasing the proportion of Black, Asian and minority ethnic student teachers. Strategies to support Welsh-medium and Black, Asian and minority ethnic recruitment, such as targeted campaigns and grassroots engagement, are beginning to have a positive influence. The partnership is also developing creative responses to key challenges, including the introduction of asynchronous professional learning materials for mentors, the use of online technology to support students' reflection, and a buddy system to strengthen links between schools. These developments reflect a growing culture of innovation.

Leadership structures within the partnership are clearly organised with distinct strategic and operational components that align appropriately with wider university leadership systems. In response to the growing size of the partnership, senior leaders have recently restructured governance processes. However, a few aspects of these revised arrangements are still evolving and have not yet had the desired impact on practice or provision.

Lead schools demonstrate a strong commitment to the partnership. They are well represented in leadership structures and play an important strategic role in designing and delivering the PGCE programme. For example, they contribute to biannual seminars that explore cross-cutting themes in Curriculum for Wales, designed in consultation with the university. Leadership responsibilities are devolved sensibly in some areas, such as the role of lead practice tutors, who oversee the review of school-based practice and are responsible for identifying issues across school clusters. In addition, school co-ordinators tailor professional learning for mentors and have strengthened their contribution to ensuring consistency of practice across schools. Student voice is beginning to influence partnership leadership through the work of the Senedd Fach, which provides a platform for students to contribute to decision-making.

Despite these strengths, leadership systems are currently not efficient or effective enough to drive the partnership's ambitions, or to bring about necessary improvements. In particular, the inclusion of lead schools at every level of governance tends to hinder timely decision-making. While leaders are clearly committed to the overarching aims of the

partnership, they do not share a clear or precise enough understanding of the partnership's strategic priorities.

Since its inception, the partnership has expanded to include schools across Wales. Given the distance learning nature of the provision, partnership leaders have emphasised the need for clear communication. However, despite considerable efforts to ensure that key messages are shared, communication across the breadth of the partnership is limited in its overall effectiveness. In too many cases, school mentors do not receive important information promptly, which leaves them uncertain about programme expectations and inhibits schools' sense of belonging to the wider partnership.

Systems to promote consistency in quality across the partnership are developing but structures for organising collaborative leadership across the wider partnership are not sufficiently well established. In particular, there is too much variability in the way that the various roles to support students in schools are undertaken. Quality assurance processes for school-based elements of the programme are not robust. For example, it is unclear how lead schools and lead practice tutors are held to account for their roles in supporting student teachers and the quality of mentoring. Similarly, there is a lack of clarity around how concerns about the effectiveness of school placements are addressed. While there are clear processes for the selection and deselection of partnership schools, there is an over-reliance on informal approaches to resolving issues. Too often, problem-solving depends on personal relationships rather than structured systems. The lack of formal processes limits the partnership's ability to monitor progress or ensure consistent improvements in practice.

The partnership's funding model is fit for purpose and aligned appropriately with its priorities. There are sound financial systems in place at university level to scrutinise spending decisions. This ensures that resources are deployed sensibly in support of the partnership's overarching aims.

There are suitable systems to support self-evaluation and improvement planning. Self-evaluation is a regular feature of sub-committee and partnership committee activity. Leaders use external examiner and moderation reports to review the partnership's work, and make frequent use of student and staff surveys to inform their evaluation of programmes. However, the partnership relies too heavily on survey outcomes, which are often skewed by low response rates. Consequently, the validity of findings is not always secure.

The gathering of first-hand evidence is beginning to inform evaluation processes, for example, with lead practice tutors contributing through moderation of student teachers' learning and progress, and their involvement in school-based monitoring activities. The partnership is developing its quality assurance systems through in-person school visits

involving university staff. These visits provide opportunities for tutors to promote greater consistency in how mentors assess student teachers' progress and to improve their understanding of how schools support student teacher development. Nonetheless, these practices are still at a very early stage and are currently voluntary for schools. As a result, they are not applied consistently or with sufficient rigour across the partnership. Overall, there is limited direct observation of teaching and mentoring, and consequently, the partnership does not have a comprehensive view of its strengths and areas for improvement because it does not draw on a wide enough range of evidence. This limits the partnership's ability to triangulate findings and evaluate provision accurately.

The partnership development plan identifies appropriate priorities and related actions based on national concerns in ITE. Leaders monitor the progress and impact of these on intended outcomes suitably. For example, leaders recognised the need to collect more meaningful data about aspects of the QTS standards, so they introduced a helpful 'skills review'. This has focused well on important aspects of students' practice, such as the quality of their lesson planning. Tutors make use of outcomes from the skills review to make appropriate changes to taught sessions and this is beginning to develop Year 1 students' understanding of how to plan effectively for pupils' learning. However, overall, leaders do not identify improvement priorities specifically enough due to the lack of first-hand evidence and, as a result, planning for improvement is not suitably precise or targeted enough to have the desired impact.

The partnership's governance model has been adjusted to strengthen accountability by centralising responsibilities for planning for improvement within the partnership committee. While sub-committees oversee specific aspects of the programme and produce action plans, the alignment between these plans and overarching partnership goals is unclear. Recently, leaders have made suitable changes to their planning processes through the introduction of task and finish groups to support their capacity to drive improvement.

The partnership demonstrates a strong commitment to research and scholarship which is embedded in the PGCE programme through a clear focus on practice-based enquiry. Members of the PGCE team contribute to wider university research initiatives and, in a few instances, mentors and students are involved in collaborative research projects focusing on important aspects of initial teacher education practice. However, it is too soon to evaluate the impact of this work on student outcomes or the quality of teaching.

The partnership has a strong commitment to professional learning. University-based staff value the well-established, university-wide culture of professional development and supportive structures that help them to pursue their aspirations and achieve their career

goals, particularly in becoming more research active. As a result of this effective support, most university staff are working towards, or have achieved, a doctoral level qualification.

The development of a research fellow role has been fundamental to establishing the emerging research culture within the partnership. An important part of this approach has been to build the skills and confidence of mentors to engage in practitioner research. This has been beneficial for a few mentors in partnership schools who are now beginning to take part in research projects. This approach has also helped to raise the profile of initial teacher education more widely across the university.

University-based staff benefit from professional learning that supports the development of their skills as distance learning tutors, making good use of the university's expertise in this field. The partnership recognises that professional learning for mentors and school-based tutors who contribute to the university's taught programme has not yet had a strong enough impact on the effectiveness of these teaching sessions.

The university offers a generic 'Open Learn' mentor development programme which is available to all mentors. This provides useful information about the general principles of mentoring and the role of mentors as teacher educators. However, currently, mentors' engagement with this programme within the partnership, and its influence on the quality of mentoring, are limited.

Broadly, mentors are highly invested in their role and view mentoring student teachers as an important part of their own professional development. New mentors receive appropriate initial training, which mainly covers the administrative aspects of the role, such as the timing of observations of students' teaching and reporting requirements. Development for mentors, however, has not focused on ensuring they have a secure understanding of their role in a blended learning context, or how to support a diverse group of student teachers with varying starting points.

Mentors value the materials provided to support their role, such as the recently introduced 'mentor mats', which provide a clear overview of their responsibilities. These resources are starting to build confidence, particularly among mentors who are not in lead partnership schools. However, these developments have not addressed the variation in mentoring quality. In addition, there are too few opportunities for mentors to share effective practice across the partnership.

## Evidence base of the report

During an inspection of initial teacher education, which includes distance learning provision, inspectors normally:

- meet the partnership leaders and individual teacher educators to evaluate the impact of the partnership's work
- meet with senior university leaders and governors to discuss the university's support for initial teacher education
- meet with senior mentors and mentors about the school-based elements of the programme and their assessment of student teachers
- meet student teachers to discuss their progress and to gain their views about various aspects of the partnership
- meet student teachers in leadership roles, such as student representatives
- observe a broad sample of learning sessions online to observe student teachers' learning and to see university and school staff teaching on the  university-based parts of the programme
- observe a sample of students teaching during their final school experience when they are close to achieving Qualified Teacher Status (QTS)
- observe a sample of mentors feeding back to students about their teaching
- scrutinise students' assignments, reflections and lesson planning
- look closely at the partnership's self-evaluation processes
- consider the partnership's improvement plan and look at evidence to show how well the partnership has taken forward planned improvements
- scrutinise a range of partnership documents, including information on student assessment and progress, records of meetings of staff and leadership groups, information on students' well-being, including the safeguarding of students and pupils, and records of staff professional learning and development
- analyse the outcomes from the student and staff questionnaires and consider their views through their questionnaire responses

After the on-site inspection and before the publication of the report, Estyn:

- reviews the findings of the inspection alongside the supporting evidence from the inspection team in order to validate, moderate and ensure the quality of the inspection.

## Copies of the report

Copies of this report are available from the school and from the Estyn website (www.estyn.gov.wales)

This report was produced in accordance with section 18c of the Education Act 1994, which was inserted by paragraph 13 of Schedule 14 of the Education Act 2005.

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of publication.  Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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