Introduction and background

Previous research into the inspection of schools’ curricula identified a number of valid components of curriculum quality which inspectors can assess. These have now been incorporated into the design and inspection methodology of the new Education Inspection Framework which was introduced in September 2019.

Changing the inspection framework for schools will necessitate changes in the inspection of initial teacher education (ITE). As with schools, Ofsted needs to establish valid components of an ITE curriculum and to establish how they can best be assessed. Phase 1 of Ofsted’s ITE research was carried out in the spring term of 2019 with the aim of establishing the main concepts of curriculum quality. On the basis of findings from phase 1, Ofsted added several criteria relating to the specifics of partnership working, namely mentor support and guidance, teacher educators’ training and relevant expertise, communication across the partnership and quality assurance practices.

Following phase 1, Ofsted developed a research model to assess the intent (curriculum planning) and implementation (partnership working) of the ITE curriculum. This report presents findings from the fieldwork which was carried out.

Key findings

Research design and methodology

- There were 22 indicators in the research model, spread across 8 categories. The categories were: rationale, concepts (understanding of research), accountability and leadership, sustainability, curriculum planning, partnerships, equality and assessment. Inspectors were given guidance on assessing each indicator on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (aspect is absent) to 5 (aspect is fully embedded).
- The visit design replicated elements of the schools’ phase 3 research. It included the element of a ‘deep dive’, into a certain subject area, redefined within the ITE context as a ‘focused review’.
- The fieldwork was carried out by 17 HMI. Visits lasted 2 days and were framed around 4 focussed reviews in subject areas or aspects related to teacher education. A total of 46 partnerships were visited: 24 SCITTs, 20 HEIs, and 2 Teach First partnerships.

Findings: partnership working

- It was important that sufficiently senior course leaders communicated the partnership’s expectations for the programme and assessment clearly. This was vital for enabling school-, setting- and centre-based teacher education to blend together into a coherent experience for trainees. However, the aims of the curriculum were only shared across the partnership and fully understood by all teacher trainers in 63 per cent of partnerships.
- In the higher scoring programmes, course leaders worked with their partnership to plan and deliver a well-sequenced ITE curriculum. Leaders of partner schools were actively involved in curriculum design. Where headteachers and professional tutors had been involved, there was alignment and synergy across the programme. As a consequence, the programme of centre-based provision and trainee placements was joined-up and allowed trainees to practise what they had learned in central provision.
- Measures taken to ensure a smooth transition between centre and placement learning included: clear explanation by providers of the types of discussion which they expected mentors to be having with trainees; and concrete suggestions to help trainees to consolidate their learning.
- In some lower-scoring partnerships, professional tutors and mentors were unaware of the focus of lectures and seminars in central provision.
- Leaders in weaker partnerships tended to arrange their programmes to meet the practical needs of partner schools and settings, rather than considering how best trainees learn and develop. Consequently, some trainees were unable to develop their school curriculum knowledge and understanding beyond centre-based learning. This was because their practice was constrained by their placement provider’s curriculum design. In some SCITTs, not all partner providers were adhering to the partnership’s agreed curriculum design.
- The extent to which trainers and mentors in schools and settings were trained for their role varied. Higher-scoring partnerships were often determined to improve their school- or setting-based mentors’ own teaching skills. Mentors were not just encouraged but required to attend continuing professional development sessions at the central provider.
- In other partnerships, however, there was a lack of clarity about the role which the mentor was expected to play in...
supporting the trainee. Course structure at the centre tended to be the priority for course leaders. This meant that structured planning for curriculum delivery across the wider partnership took a back seat. Course leaders expected that partner providers would deliver on other aspects of teacher education but there was no coherent plan about how this could be achieved.

- The highest scoring partnerships had quality assurance systems that enabled effective two-way communication. These included electronic tracking systems which mentors were encouraged to use to provide feedback on trainees’ development and performance. This enabled course leaders to intervene when they found gaps in their trainees’ teaching knowledge and understanding.

Curriculum planning

- In the highest scoring partnerships, the sequence of the curriculum was often built with an understanding and consideration of the learning process. Trainees were recognised as novice teachers. Content was grounded in providing them with sufficiently cumulative knowledge and understanding. The strongest partnerships tended to assess trainees’ previous experience and knowledge at the start of the course.
- In stronger partnerships, course content in seminars and lectures at the central provider were linked with practice in placements which revisited the same themes.
- In weaker partnerships, sequencing of content was generally ignored in favour of attempting to capture everything in bite-size chunks to ensure coverage of the ‘Teachers’ standards’. This often led to trainees having only a surface-level understanding of teaching concepts and being less well prepared at the end of their programme.
- The ITE curriculum in weaker partnerships tended to cover large chunks of material in centre-based sessions. Trainees complained about the cognitive overload of this approach, saying how they were unable to process the information effectively.
- Coverage on subject knowledge and subject-specific pedagogy was often a real strength of partnerships led by HEIs. However, in the weaker HEI programmes, the emphasis on subjects at the centre often left other aspects of teaching to the trainee placements. Poor communication between the centre and placements often resulted in a lack of coherence in the overall programme.
- Weaker SCITT provision was characterised by weaknesses in the delivery of subject-specific pedagogy because the expertise was not always available. In secondary programmes, this led to trainees not developing an in-depth understanding of their subject. In the weakest examples, it led to an ITE curriculum geared towards educating trainees on how to maximise Progress 8 scores. In 2 secondary SCITT programmes, trainees were being taught to plan their curriculum working backwards from what was required in Year 11 in order to maximise these scores.
- SCITT provision tended to feature greater and more coherent coverage of other aspects of teaching, such as behaviour management and SEND, than HEI partnerships. It also provided trainees with more hands-on practical experience. In a few HEI partnerships, course leaders admitted that teaching pupils with SEND or EAL were areas for improvement. However, there were other partnerships which had effective practices, such as offering trainees a week in a special school or asking them to produce a journal or case study.
- Behaviour management was prioritised across partnerships because controlling the classroom was something that trainees were often most concerned about prior to starting the course. In the best partnerships, the focus on behaviour was initiated at the start of the programme and reinforced regularly, particularly by mentors.
- Weaknesses in ITE programmes were more acute for primary school trainees. This was often related to the limited coverage of the foundation subjects and science on a one-year ITE programme. The strongest partnerships mitigated this by offering additional subject sessions, making sure that placements were geared towards providing trainees with opportunities to teach foundation subjects and linking trainees’ progression with professional development courses in their NQT year.
- The extent to which providers were up to date with educational research varied considerably. In some HEI partnerships, trainees benefited from trainers who were experts in their field. However, issues arose when the means for transferring theory into useful practice in placements was underdeveloped. In some partnerships, inspectors identified outdated or irrelevant theories being taught in centre-based provision. For example, in one partnership, a reading list which trainees were given included material on applying now de-bunked neuro-myths. This meant that some trainees lacked knowledge on both how pupils learn and on curriculum design.

Inspector perceptions of the research model

- Inspectors in a focus group commonly reported that the design of the research model including the focused review method was important in providing a clear structure for the research visits and for enabling them to articulate the strengths and weaknesses of the partnership.
- A few inspectors said that the 5-point scale, would have worked better as a four-point scale. This is because the criteria in the rubric for a score of 1 was very much aligned to there being an absence of curriculum design, something unlikely to be found within ITE partnerships.
- Inspectors said that the evidence collected from trainees was essential for triangulating the impact of the ITE curriculum. They also felt that discussions with NQTs were of value.

Conclusions

- Overall, the data from the research model provides a helpful alternative view to current practice. The model is assessing what we are intending for it to measure – curriculum quality – rather than replicating existing criteria.
- The evidence points towards a structure and process that works in different ITE contexts that does not favour one curriculum approach over another. This suggests that the research model has good face validity. The outcomes from the model provide a degree of confidence that Ofsted’s plans to assess the broader ITE curriculum are possible and necessary.
- The pilot inspections which have now begun will allow Ofsted to assess how the indicators and the focused review process work under inspection conditions. Here will be further consultation with the sector over the spring term.

The full document can be downloaded from: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-education-curriculum-research/building-great-teachers

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