Initial teacher education

Providers

6

Partnerships

Learners

1,405

There were 1,405 entrant enrolments in 2023-2024

895 entrants were training to teach at primary school and 505 entrants were training to teach at secondary school.

Source: Initial teacher education: August 2022 to July 2024 | GOV.WALES

Core inspections

No. of core inspections between 2019 and 2025: **7**

Follow-up

No. of partnerships in follow-up between 2019 and 2025: **5**

Re-inspection: **1**

Enhanced Estyn engagement: **4**

Summary

There are currently six partnerships (comprising universities and their partner schools) of initial teacher education (ITE) in Wales. The partnerships provide undergraduate and post-graduate routes into teaching. A part-time PGCE and an employment-based route are provided by the Open University Partnership.

In 2019, Estyn began a new cycle of core inspections in ITE, shortly after the first round of accreditation events. However, due to the pandemic, inspections did not begin until September 2021. At that point there were seven new partnerships of ITE. During the cycle, two partnerships did not require follow-up, four required Estyn enhanced engagement and one partnership required re-inspection. The partnership that was in need of re-inspection withdrew its provision in the following year. The cycle of inspections was completed in 2025. Currently, there are three partnerships in the follow-up category of Estyn enhanced engagement.

The following sector report draws together the inspection findings from the whole cycle.

Initial Teacher Education, 2019-2025

Learning and well-being

Across the cycle, most student teachers consistently demonstrated a commitment to both their personal and professional development. They built supportive relationships with mentors, tutors, peers and school staff, which helped them to develop positive professional attitudes and encouraged collaboration. Generally, however, students entering the teaching profession in recent years are less resilient than previous cohorts.

Many students developed an appropriate range of skills that they need to be effective classroom practitioners. Overall, they were good communicators, providing structured explanations and clear instructions. A majority modelled learning well for their pupils. However, students' development is too dependent on the quality of practice in the schools in which they are placed. Although many had opportunities to observe effective practice and provision in lead schools, the progress of a minority of students was limited by weaker practice in their placement schools. As a result, students perpetuated misconceptions about the Curriculum for Wales, for example including the four purposes explicitly in every lesson plan, or in their use of the progression steps. In a few schools, students were influenced by weak practice in foundation learning, or were only provided with opportunities to teach very small groups of pupils.

Another common shortcoming in students' planning was an overreliance on published schemes or the schools' plans for learning. Moreover, mentors did not encourage students strongly enough to take ownership of their planning. As a result, a majority of students did not gain a thorough enough understanding of the elements of an effective plan. This limited their development as flexible, creative practitioners. A few students planned imaginatively. Where they were supported to do so, they drew creatively on their own experiences or expertise to create stimulating and engaging learning experiences.

Overall, students' development of their planning skills is a common shortcoming. Although many students were diligent in completing lesson plans, many did not have a good enough understanding of the necessity to identify clear and specific learning objectives. This meant that they did not always choose the most effective learning and teaching approaches, did not develop their questioning well enough, and did not use the most appropriate assessment techniques.

Many students had suitable literacy, numeracy and digital skills. A few students had weaknesses in their personal literacy, in English and in Welsh, and as a result made spelling and grammatical errors in the classroom. Over the course of the cycle, we found increasingly that a few primary students had more limited numeracy skills and struggled to plan mathematics and numeracy lessons in school. Overall, students' ability to plan for and support pupils to apply their literacy, numeracy and digital skills across the curriculum was at an early stage of development.

Over the cycle, many partnerships have invested in developing students' Welsh language skills. As a result, students who are learning Welsh on their course made good progress and developed a suitable understanding of the importance of developing their pupils' Welsh language skills. However, particularly on secondary programmes, the extent to which associate teachers placed in English-medium schools developed pupils' Welsh language skills was too variable.

Spotlight: The Cardiff Partnership's Welsh Language Development

The Cardiff Partnership's Welsh Language Development provision supports their students with tailored language programmes, collaboratively designed with university tutors and Welsh-speaking school staff. Students are grouped by proficiency, from beginners to fluent speakers in Pontio and Gloywi groups. The sessions blend Welsh culture, pedagogy, and the development of Welsh language skills. A key feature is the Pontio group, targeting Welsh speakers who have opted for English-medium training but may transition to Welsh-medium teaching. With rising participation, Pontio offers personalised support in small group settings to reactivate language skills, boost confidence, and maintain pathways into the Welsh-medium sector. Students reflect on progress through portfolios and the Fframwaith system, evidencing growth in spoken and written Welsh and classroom pedagogy.

Many students managed their workload suitably, although a minority told us that they struggled with balancing the demands of planning for school alongside writing assignments. However, this response varied from partnership to partnership. Where the partnership had considered the timing and nature of assignments, students were more positive. Crucially, students managed their workloads more competently where they could make clear and beneficial connections between their assignments and their development as teachers.

While reflection was encouraged across programmes, the quality of students' critical thinking varied considerably. Many students described their teaching activities well but stopped short of evaluating the impact of their practice on pupil progress. In such cases, students' evaluations of their progress often focused on meeting targets rather than developing a deep understanding of what effective teaching looks like. Links between theory and practice were frequently underdeveloped, and students' use of educational research was often limited to surface-level references or narrow reading.

Most students showed a clear understanding of safeguarding procedures and value the importance of inclusion and equity.

At the beginning of the inspection cycle, we were inspecting in partnerships when COVID-19 restrictions were still in place. We noted at the time that students' ability to manage their classes was often a strong feature of their teaching. However, in hindsight, students were often supported in this aspect by strict behaviour management rules brought in by schools to deal with the pandemic. Since that time, we have noted that, increasingly, more students have found classroom management challenging.

Teaching and learning experiences

Across the ITE partnerships, there was a clear commitment **to designing programmes** that enable student teachers to achieve Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and meet accreditation requirements. Many programmes were underpinned by conceptual frameworks, that in the best instances provided strategic direction for the work of the partnership and established a rationale for programme design.

All partnerships promoted the **core values** of what it means to be a teacher in Wales. Students were

encouraged to reflect on their personal philosophies, develop professional dispositions, and engage critically with their own development. Programmes were increasingly rooted in a **research-informed** ethos, with opportunities for students to conduct enquiry, reflect on their practice, and engage with theory. This was most effectively embedded in programmes where there was strategic support, for example in roles such as 'research champions' or in the design of structured reflection tools. Most ITE programmes provided purposeful opportunities to engage with issues of **equity, diversity, social justice, and anti-racism**.

A key difference in programmes offered by the partnerships established post-2019 is the design of learning experiences that aimed to bring together **theory and practice**. Lead schools have worked with their partner HEIs to create school-based learning experiences and, in the best cases, these approaches have helped to foster collaborative dialogue between student teachers, tutors, and mentors, enriching the understanding of how academic knowledge translates into classroom teaching. However, while research and reflection are a priority, in practice, across a majority of programmes, connections between theory and classroom practice were often underdeveloped. Students frequently failed to embed enquiry learning into their school-based activities to improve their teaching. Many mentors and a few tutors did not always make these connections explicit, missing valuable opportunities to deepen professional learning.

Many partnerships have not supported students well enough to record and consider their own **progress**. This makes it difficult for students to reflect systematically on their development or track their progress against the professional standards. In addition, only a few partnerships have devised beneficial means for mentors and tutors to contribute to and support this process.

Generally, most programmes included helpful learning experiences that support students' understanding of **Curriculum for Wales**. Over time, as schools have embedded practice, students have begun to experience the variety of ways that the curriculum is planned and delivered across Wales. Many lead schools have contributed their knowledge and practice of these developments well to the programmes. However, across many programmes, opportunities for students to develop their understanding of different models of curriculum design and to reflect critically on planning for Curriculum for Wales were underdeveloped.

Many partnerships were successfully supporting the development of students' **Welsh language skills** through tailored provision, graduated courses, and enrichment sessions. These are often well received by student teachers and reflect a national commitment to bilingual education.

In a few partnerships, students have also benefited from additional **enrichment opportunities** that broadened their professional experience. These included thematic conferences, the use of education providers outside of the school sector, such as museum education or sports clubs, and involvement in wider community-based learning. These opportunities enhanced student teachers' confidence, cultural awareness, and preparedness to meet diverse learning needs.

Despite these strengths, a lack of coherence between different elements of the programmes was a recurring weakness across many partnerships. In several cases, **school-based and university-based components** were not sufficiently aligned, leading to inconsistencies and duplication in content or missed opportunities to reinforce learning. In a minority of partnerships, especially on PGCE programmes, learning experiences were poorly timed, or the content was overloaded, which reduced the relevance and impact of the learning experiences, hindering students' ability to consolidate their understanding. In a minority of partnerships, learning experiences to develop **subject knowledge**

and pedagogies in primary and secondary programmes have not supported students well enough to develop and deepen these skills, or to make meaningful connections between areas of learning. Opportunities to develop student teachers' ability to support **pupil progression in literacy, numeracy, and digital competence** were also inconsistent. While there was often suitable support for students' personal skills, in too many partnerships there were limited opportunities for students to consider how to plan for the progressive development of pupils' skills.

Overall, student teachers do not always develop the critical understanding, practical skills and professional confidence needed to teach independently and effectively by the end of their training. This is because ITE programmes in Wales do not support carefully or creatively enough the **learning journey of the student teacher** from novice to being ready to enter the profession.

In general, many partnerships promoted a strong emphasis on **well-being and pastoral care**. Students benefited from accessible and supportive tutors and mentors as well as more formal systems such as 'well-being check-ins', online resources, counselling, and financial advice.

Spotlight: The Swansea University Schools' Partnership (SUSP)

The Swansea University Schools' Partnership (SUSP) has embedded student and staff well-being into the core of its PGCE programmes since their introduction in 2020 and 2022. Emerging from the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the partnership developed a safe, inclusive learning environment through initiatives like 'Well-being Wednesdays' and carefully designed calendars of events. Students benefit from an early programme start and strategic resources such as observation classrooms and specialist labs, easing transitions and boosting confidence. Relationships are at the heart of the approach, with Practice and Theory days fostering dialogue among students, tutors, and schools. Support continues through placements, with mentor engagement, drop-in sessions, and tailored interventions maintaining strong community connections. Students' mental health is further supported through creative practices including mindfulness and well-being dogs, while academic well-being is strengthened by formative feedback and opportunities to revise final assignments.

In a few instances, partnerships did not take good enough account of the impact of programme requirements on students' well-being, such as travelling long distances to and from their placement schools. Although most universities have systems in place for **reasonable adjustments and disability support**, implementation of such support in school settings was inconsistent. In the main, this was due to an over-reliance on schools to be proactive rather than there being a co-ordinated process, gaps in communication between university and school and a variable understanding of how to meet students' additional needs in practice. As a result, students did not always receive the support they needed.

All partnerships had suitable processes for tracking the progress of individual students, and in the most effective practice, students were well supported, and their progress was monitored carefully towards outcomes that were appropriate for the individual. However, in a minority of instances, support plans were too vague, and there were inconsistencies in processes to review this support or evaluate the effectiveness of these processes.

Across nearly all partnerships, in many learning sessions, there were positive, respectful, and supportive **relationships** between student teachers and their tutors or mentors. These relationships foster trust, well-being, and confidence, allowing student teachers to engage openly, ask questions, and reflect on their development.

Many tutors possess good **subject and phase knowledge**. They used this knowledge to plan engaging sessions, model teaching strategies, and link academic content to real-life classroom scenarios. In the most effective cases, tutors made clear connections between **theory and practice**, encouraged critical thinking and reflection, and used research to enrich their teaching.

Most mentors demonstrated a genuine desire to support student teachers, and many provided regular oral and written **feedback** during school experiences. In the strongest examples, mentors facilitated critical reflection, probed student thinking, and encouraged connections to theory.

A common shortcoming across all partnerships was the inconsistency in the quality of both **university teaching and school-based mentoring**. While there were examples of excellent practice, these were not widespread. A few tutors lacked sufficient subject and pedagogical knowledge and, although many tutors encouraged reflection, a minority provided too few opportunities for meaningful, critical engagement. In many sessions, tutors did not use the most appropriate teaching approaches themselves, relying too heavily on presentations, limiting student participation and critical dialogue.

In students' school experiences, overall, too much mentor feedback lacked depth, with feedback focusing on classroom management and teaching strategies, rather than evaluating the impact of teaching on pupil learning, or the relevance of the lesson content. Mentors rarely addressed the development of pupils' skills, particularly literacy and numeracy in feedback sessions, missing chances to strengthen student teachers' understanding.

Target setting for students, both in school experience and in written feedback on assignments, was often overly generous, vague or too broad from both tutors and mentors. A majority of mentors did not provide enough support for key areas for improvement such as lesson planning, pupil assessment, or students' lack of subject knowledge.

Despite the emphasis on blending research with classroom experience, there was inconsistent support for students on school experience to consider the links between theory and practice. Although mentors supported students' research tasks appropriately, many mentors were unaware of the content of the university programme.

Spotlight: The Cardiff Partnership

The Cardiff Partnership has strengthened its provision by embedding research-informed clinical practice in collaboration with Oxford University. Drawing on the Oxford Internship model, the approach actively involves schools in shaping the curriculum, pedagogy and structure of training programmes. A central innovation is the introduction of Research Champions (RC) across Lead Partnership Schools/Alliances. These champions guide and support student teachers' engagement with school-based research, acting as role models while helping to bridge the longstanding gap between classroom practice and academic research. RCs are supported through professional development networks led by Cardiff Metropolitan University and national initiatives such as national strategy for Education Research and Enquiry (NSERE) and National Professional Enquiry Project (NPEP). Their presence has led to meaningful impact: student assignments show deeper contextual insight and understanding of teaching and well-being, while school staff benefit from growing confidence in research-informed practice. In some cases, student-led findings have even shaped school decisions, for example prompting increased support for outdoor learning based on research conducted around pupil well-being.

Spotlight: Swansea University Schools' Partnership

Swansea University Schools' Partnership (SUSP) has positioned educational research and professional enquiry at the heart of its PGCE programmes. To drive its vision of nurturing reflective, research-informed practitioners, SUSP established the Centre for Research into Practice (CRIP), which supports accessible, collaborative projects with schools and stakeholders. Students explore research systematically using tailored materials and clinical-practice style assignments, while programme design encourages hands-on investigations and theory-based learning. Investment in staffing, infrastructure and CPD ensures a thriving research culture supported by initiatives such as observation classrooms, speed dating with faculty researchers, and regular seminars. All staff in the department actively conduct research, and student teachers benefit from real-world research opportunities in varied educational settings. Projects like the Young Educational Researchers Network (YERN) extend impact into schools and communities, while alumni reflect positively on the value of research to their early careers.

Leadership

The need for reform in ITE and the accreditation of the partnerships brought about a strong sense of collaboration between schools and universities and, in the best cases, this has fostered mutual trust, respect and commitment. During the pandemic, partnerships adapted their provision regularly and creatively to meet changing restrictions. However, the reform has not been without its challenges. Despite structured governance arrangements, many partnerships struggle with joint leadership and joint accountability in practice, and many school-based partners were often not fully involved in leadership processes. Responsibilities and accountability structures were often unclear, making decision-making and the ability to drive priorities and actions limited. Moreover, leadership was not

distributed effectively enough. In most partnerships, too much responsibility was placed on the Director of ITE, with too little leadership support for this role. This has created a situation where leadership in ITE is too fragile and precarious.

Many partnerships articulated a clear, well-communicated vision for ITE, typically underpinned by core national priorities such as promoting bilingualism, equity and diversity, and research-informed practice. This vision was often co-constructed and shared across university and school-based staff, helping to promote consistency in purpose.

Many partnerships had clear and logical leadership structures. These tended to include an executive board or senior groups with strategic overview, supported by an operational level of leadership, often grouped by workstreams such as 'teaching and learning', 'quality' or 'research'. In most partnerships there were joint leadership roles to reflect the shared responsibilities of the partnership. A majority of partnerships were developing helpful data systems to analyse student information and outcomes and track student progress and, in the most effective cases, these were guiding a few aspects of strategic decision-making. However, overall, processes for self-evaluation and planning for improvement continued to be a weakness across ITE. There was an over-reliance on student surveys (that often did not yield the most useful information), and a lack of robust, first-hand evidence, particularly of teaching and mentoring. Many partnerships tended to identify priorities too broadly and not use the findings of their own self-evaluation to specify priorities. Improvement planning was not sharp enough, lacking precision and clear success criteria, and there was too much focus on operational fixes rather than strategic reform. As a result, partnerships did not identify clearly enough those areas most in need of improvement, nor did they bring about improvements swiftly. In the few best examples, middle leaders (in the main, programme directors) and directors of education used their expertise and experience wisely and proactively to bring about important improvements in provision and practice. However, these actions were not systematic enough, or considered more broadly or strategically to make a strong enough impact across the work of the partnership.

A developing feature of all partnerships was the strong commitment to professional learning and research-informed development. Many university tutors have been well supported to lead scholarly activity, such as 'research fellow', and have helped to embed reflective and research-rich cultures. Partnerships have promoted enquiry-based learning, both for students and mentors, with several leading or participating in national research projects.

Mentor development has been a challenge for all partnerships, particularly in the promotion of mentoring skills and dispositions. Many partnerships have strengthened their professional learning by providing a focus on research and reflective dialogue, and have provided helpful guidance materials for mentors. This has helped to foster the professionalism of the mentoring role. However, in too many instances, mentor development is overly focused on administrative duties rather than developmental mentoring skills and there were too few opportunities for mentors to share effective practice. The resulting variability in mentoring was compounded by weaknesses in the quality assurance of mentors' practice. Many mentors were unsure of the effectiveness of their practice and many partnerships were unsighted as to the quality of mentoring across their schools.

Overview of recommendations from inspection

All partnerships received a recommendation to improve aspects of programme design, including the coherence, sequencing and progression of learning experiences. These recommendations reflect the need for partnerships to ensure that student teachers develop their

knowledge, skills and understanding in a more integrated and developmental way across university and school contexts.

Nearly all partnerships (six out of seven) received a recommendation to improve the quality and consistency of teaching and mentoring. These typically focused on ensuring that student teachers benefit from effective modelling of practice, clear developmental feedback, and a coherent approach across the partnership.

Nearly all (six out of seven) were also advised to strengthen self-evaluation and improvement planning processes, particularly in relation to how evidence is used to identify priorities and drive improvement across the partnership.

In addition, the majority of partnerships received a recommendation to strengthen wider aspects of leadership, governance and accountability. These included clarifying strategic direction, improving joint leadership between schools and universities, and ensuring that leadership at all levels is effective in driving improvement.

Across the partnerships, recommendations highlighted the need to strengthen student teachers' skills and knowledge in key areas essential for effective teaching, such as understanding phase and subject pedagogy, and improving lesson planning. **In many cases, inspection findings identified the need to develop student teachers' critical reflection skills and to support them in making more meaningful connections between theory and practice.**