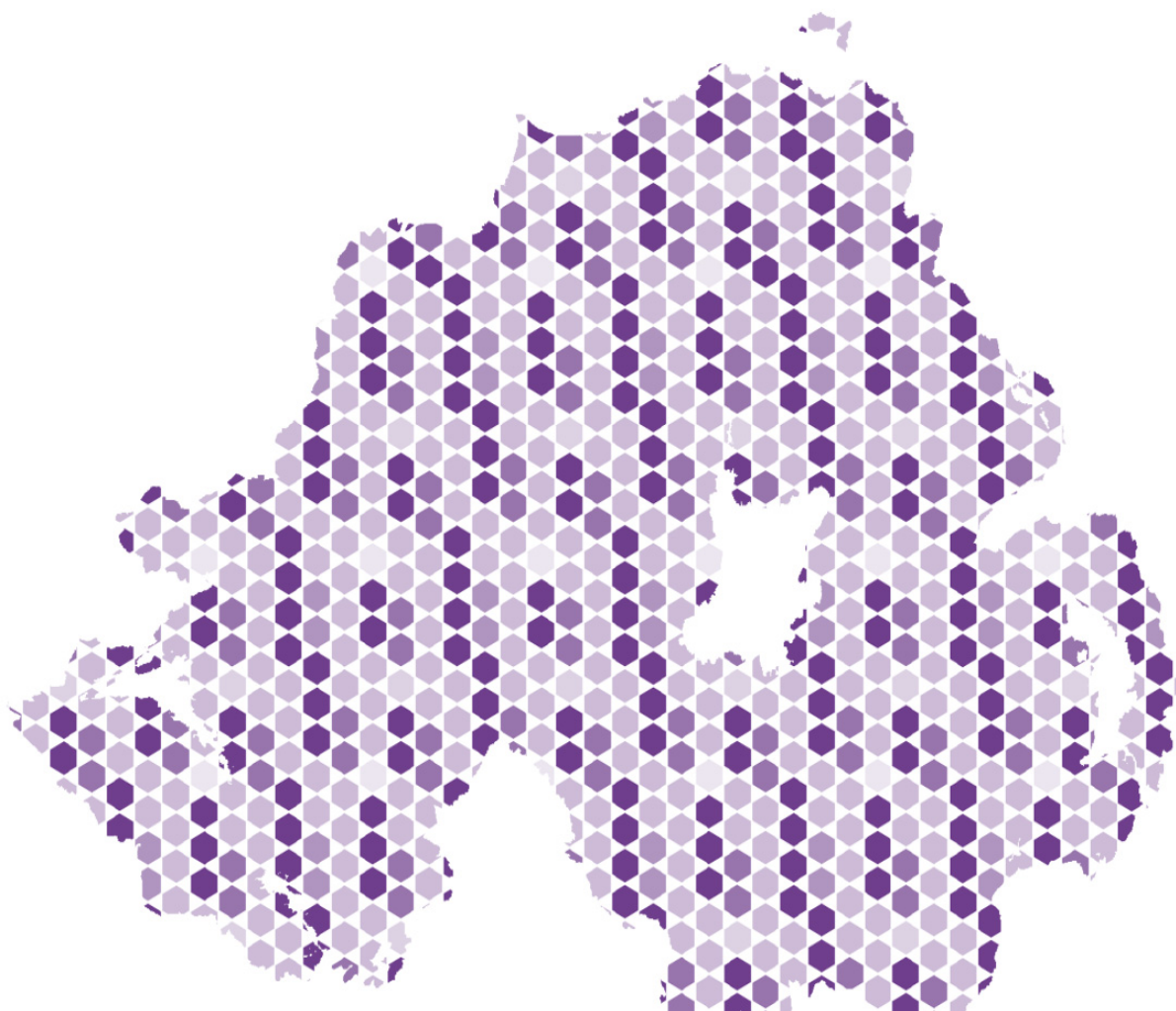


TEACHER/HIGHER EDUCATION INSPECTION



**Education and Training
Inspectorate**

**Flexible PGCE Programme,
with a focus on Literacy and Numeracy
The Open University**

**Report of an Inspection
in June 2010**

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In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

In assessing the various features of the provision, the Inspectorate relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

1. SELF-EVALUATION AND INSPECTION

1.1 The inspection of the Post-primary Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme provided by the Open University's, Department of Education of the Faculty of Education and Language Studies (OU) was conducted within the terms of the Department of Education (DE) Circular 2010/03 *Initial Teacher Education: Approval of Programmes* which sets out the requirements which programmes must meet to be approved by DE. The provision is required by the Circular to be of a quality which is judged by Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) to be at least satisfactory. The inspection adopted a focus on literacy and numeracy across the curriculum of the programme. The choice of a curriculum focus was influenced by the draft strategy *Every School a Good School: a strategy for raising achievement in literacy and numeracy* (DE, Bangor, 2008). The document *Self-evaluation and inspection of initial teacher education provision, 2009-2010* (Inspectorate, July 2009) contains the framework of quality indicators employed for the inspection.

1.2 In advance of the visit, the university produced a short self-evaluation (SE) report (Annex). In arriving at an evaluation of the levels of competence of student teachers, the university and the Inspectorate independently evaluated and reported on how well the student teachers are achieving and on the quality of provision for learning which, together, comprise a single summary performance level for the overall effectiveness of the provision (quality and outcomes). They also both evaluated and reported on the effectiveness of leadership and management, including the effectiveness of self-evaluation in securing improvement by raising achievement and enhancing quality.

2. THE EVIDENCE BASE

2.1 The OU offers a flexible PGCE programme which is an online distance-learning course. A team of inspectors visited the Open University on two days and, furthermore, five inspectors explored the online resources in depth over a period of time. Course planning, the progress of the students and the university's quality assurance processes were also discussed in detail during an extended meeting. The extensive documentation provided by the university was also reviewed.

2.2 Given the flexible nature of the PGCE programme, the number of students on school placements can vary. At the time of the inspection, five students were in schools; all five were visited and were observed teaching. Inspectors also observed the feedback sessions between students, school mentors and university tutors and held discussions with all. The students' school experience files were reviewed as were the students' assignments and other written work. Inspectors also attended a day school, the purpose of which is to enable the students to work together on generic issues relating to teaching and learning. In addition, a range of informal discussions were held with, for example, school principals, pupils and the student teachers themselves, both during placement and at the day school.

3. THE PROFESSIONAL GRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN EDUCATION (PGCE) PROGRAMME OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

3.1 The OU aims to provide teacher education for students who require maximum flexibility to accommodate their personal needs and circumstances. The overall aim of the PGCE programme is to develop the students' competence in professional values and professional practice, professional knowledge and understanding; and professional skills and application.

3.2 The OU has been a provider of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) since 1994. The current PGCE programme is an online distance-learning course which provides training in

six subject areas: design & technology, geography, mathematics, modern (foreign) languages, music and science. Currently, 20 student places are available for Northern Ireland as determined by the DE and the Department of Employment and Learning. The OU PGCE programme is offered as a flexible course; there are multiple entry and finishing points and four potential routes which link to three progressive levels and an assessment-only path. The programme begins with a detailed initial needs analysis, which recognises prior experience in determining the level of entry and the route a student will take. The student's path through the course is fashioned by a series of individual training plans.

3.3 Students are typically in employment or are parents based at home and their school experience is generally located in nearby schools. A comprehensive school partnership agreement details the roles and responsibilities played by the school and the university during the two periods of school experience the students undertake if they enter at level 1 and level 2 to the programme. The schools play a major role in ascertaining the students' suitability to undertake the programme and in supporting them throughout the programme. Students are supported both online and face-to-face, by a personal tutor who works in partnership with school-based mentors and with subject leaders, who are centrally-based academic staff.

3.4 The framework and resources for all six subjects follow the same generic structure and format. The OU Flexible PGCE programme offers a unique route into ITE for university graduates who are unable to participate in full-time, structured courses. As such, it provides an important pathway for prospective teachers who bring a range of experiences and have much to offer the teaching profession.

4. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

4.1 Leadership and management of the PGCE are located in the Faculty's Department of Education. There is also a central ITE Support Centre in Milton Keynes that handles admission and other administrative arrangements in support of the local staff in Belfast. School partnerships are managed by a regional staff tutor located in Belfast.

4.2 The SE report (Annex) produced in preparation for the inspection indicates that all staff, centrally and locally, are engaged in the process of self-evaluation and continuous improvement of the university's PGCE programme. The Inspectorate agrees that the areas for development identified in the document are appropriate.

4.3 The strengths include:

- the commitment to improvement as demonstrated by the high quality of the monitoring and self-evaluation of the provision, including the value placed on seeking the views of stakeholders and effecting improvements as a result;
- the management arrangements, which meet effectively the individual needs of the students;
- the rigour of the selection procedure and the initial needs analysis process;
- the excellent communication, and collegial and collaborative working relationships between all partners in the programme;
- the clarity of the roles and responsibilities of all key partners, and the effective partnerships between the university and schools; and

- the pro-active role of the regional staff tutor in developing links with local schools and monitoring and evaluating the quality of the students' school experience.

Overall, the effectiveness of leadership and management in securing improvement by raising achievement and enhancing quality is outstanding.

5. **ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS**

5.1 The strengths as regards achievement and standards include:

- the very good progress in relation to the Northern Ireland Teacher Competences demonstrated by the students and the high standards achieved by the students by the end of level 3;
- the strong commitment demonstrated by the students to the welfare, pastoral care and individual needs of learners;
- the high quality of the work evident in the students' assignments and the very clear link between practice, reflection and research which demonstrates a distinctive approach to enquiry based teaching;
- the development of the OU 'three levels of professional competences' and the very good use of the individual training plans, target-setting and thorough self-evaluation to enable the students to manage their own learning and embed professional practice; and
- the calibre of the students and the breadth of experience they bring to the programme and to the schools within which they are placed.

5.2 An area for development is:

- the need to continue to review the OU 'three levels of professional competences' framework in response to consultation.

Overall, the standards achieved by the students are very good, with some outstanding features.

6. **THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING**

6.1 The PGCE programme aims to develop the students' personal literacy and numeracy skills and their competence in contributing to the development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. Literacy and numeracy are addressed in a systematic manner in both the online distance-learning materials and the school experience activities. The strengths of the provision reported by students to members of the inspection team included the professional and personal support given by university and school staff, the flexible nature of the course and the focus placed upon meeting individual needs. The students indicated that the OU sought and acted upon their views and they did not report any areas for improvement. The results of a small scale staff questionnaire were highly positive.

6.2 The strengths include:

- the comprehensive and progressive content, structure and the coherence of the course and of the programme materials, including those designed to support the school mentors;
- the systematic addressing of a range of core educational issues which are relevant to the NI curriculum, including literacy and numeracy, and the teacher competences within the programme and within the student activities;
- the provision of day schools to enhance the students' knowledge and experience;
- the very effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) to support distance and collaborative learning, and to provide access to resources;
- the high quality of the assessment, feedback and support which results in improvement and in high quality student learning; and
- the strong commitment made to meeting the needs of the individual students.

6.3 An area for improvement is:

- the need to continue the work started on refining aspects of the online materials to align them more fully with the revised NI curriculum.

SCHOOL-BASED WORK

6.4 The strengths of the school-based work include:

- the quality of the teaching observed, most of which was good or better;
- the thorough preparation and planning undertaken by the students and their commitment to the course and to the schools;
- the students' commitment to reflective practice, self evaluation and target-setting in order to improve their practice;
- the excellent quality of most of the feedback sessions observed between the student, tutor and mentor, which affirm the students, develops their capacity to reflect and provides detailed guidance on next steps;
- the commitment of the host schools and in particular of the individual mentors to the partnership, their willingness to undertake the significant input of work and time associated with the mentoring role and the very high quality of most of the support observed.

Overall, the quality of provision for learning is outstanding.

Overall, the quality of provision for learning and the standards achieved by the students is outstanding.

7. **CONCLUSION**

7.1 In the areas inspected, the quality of the provision of teacher education (and self-evaluation) is outstanding. The provider is meeting very effectively the needs of the student teachers and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

The overall quality of teacher education (and self-evaluation) is outstanding.
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SUMMARY OF SELF-EVALUATION BY THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Overall performance is generally very good, with some examples of outstanding performance and areas for further improvement identified.

Self-Evaluation of Leadership and Management in the PGCE Programme

Based on both on-going self assessment procedures and external independent evaluations of the programme across the UK:

Strengths

- very strong collaborative relationships between academic and administrative staff based on the 'Course Team' model of programme production and maintenance;
- a dedicated central ITE Support Centre in the registry supporting academic staff in Belfast in ensuring the quality of students' school experience;
- extensive use of computer conferencing to facilitate extensive discussion prior to fortnightly meetings of both the management team and of the academic programme team;
- strong involvement of staff in educational and scholarly activity, producing academic materials and resources for wider use in the profession;
- strong partnership arrangements, including a school-based interview of applicants and a school mentor model for tuition and support;
- thorough monitoring, evaluation and review procedures with progress against targets monitored frequently;
- very high quality mixed-media resources written to a common programme-wide format to promote consistency in the quality of the learning experience.

Aspects for further development in Leadership and Management are:

- find new ways of recruiting schools, possibly by making links with alumni;
- develop a clearer 'cause for concern' procedure that will help a mentor flag any difficulties earlier;
- develop processes for collecting more reliable destination data;
- Course team members take responsibility for monitoring specific areas of national developments.

The University believes that the performance level in the area of Leadership and Management in the PGCE Primary programme is outstanding.

Self-Evaluation of Achievements and Standards in the PGCE Programme

Based on both on-going self assessment procedures and external independent evaluations of the programme across the UK:

Strengths

- Northern Ireland mentors report that progress and achievement of OU students against the competences (including competence 1) are 'good' or 'very good';
- all students undergo a needs analysis process to establish an individual training plan which is revisited and adjusted at the end of each stage as students develop their ability to be reflective, self-critical and professional in their practice;
- good experience of the use of ICT though the mixed-media tuition;
- development of a 'three levels of competence' document to facilitate the dialogue about progression in aspects of teaching across the course.

Aspects for further development in Achievements and Standards are:

- work with tutors to support them in encouraging students in being reflective, and provide additional supporting notes to encourage reflection and critique;
- review the tools OU and British Council offer to students to improve written English and in structuring written answers, particularly for EAL students;
- review the clarity and ease of use of the 'three levels of competence' document in response to feedback.

The University believes that the performance level in the areas of Achievements and Standards and Quality of Provision for Learning in the PGCE programme is good.

Self-Evaluation of Quality of Provision for Learning in the PGCE Programme

Based on both on-going self assessment procedures and external independent evaluations of the programme across the UK:

Strengths

- a well developed on-line mixed-media programme, individually tailored to the personal learning needs of each student that is consistent across each subject, and is relevant, coherent and progressive;
- provision of one-on-one tutorial support supplement by computer conferencing;
- high quality of student learning in schools through the mentoring process;
- high quality of assessment and feedback;
- support and tracking of students with special learning needs.

Aspects for further development in Quality of Provision for Learning are:

- consider alternative ways of presenting materials in the new VLE environment;
- reduce the number of supplementary documents and make use of structured content as the new PGCE website is developed;
- use the regular award boards to work with nation-based and subject-specific external examiners to identify aspects of the course that need modifying/updating.

The University believes that the performance level in the areas of Quality of Provision for Learning in the PGCE programme is very good.

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