

INITIAL TEACHER/HIGHER EDUCATION INSPECTION

Bachelor of Education Honours Degree
Programmes in primary and post-primary
education

Stranmillis University College,
Belfast

Inspected: April-June 2020

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Context of the Bachelor of Education Honours Degree Programmes in primary and post-primary education

Stranmillis University College (the College) has been a provider of initial teacher education for almost 100 years. The mission of the College is to *“transform the lives of children, young people and communities through excellence in teaching, scholarship and research”* Queen’s University, Belfast (QUB) has been the awarding body for the College since 1968, and conducts a range of procedures to ensure quality assurance and high academic standards. In 1999, Stranmillis College became a University College of QUB.

The College offers two Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) Honours degree programmes, which are provided in a unitary manner. When successfully completed, student teachers are awarded an honours degree and are recognised as qualified to teach by the General Teaching Council, Northern Ireland (GTCNI).

The **post-primary B. Ed.** programme consists of four main subject-based specialist course modules. Main subject teaching is provided in business and enterprise, mathematics and science, religious studies, and in technology and design.

Post–primary subsidiary subjects are available to all except the students of mathematics and science; these subject choices are in mathematics, religious studies, computing, physical education, literary studies and English.

In the **B. Ed. primary** programme students choose an area of specialism from the Northern Ireland Curriculum from art and design, drama, music, English and literacy, geography and history, mathematics and numeracy, physical education, religious education and science and technology.

Furthermore, in the B. Ed. primary programme, Curriculum Studies provides the necessary knowledge and understanding of all areas of the Northern Ireland Curriculum and helps develop students’ intellectual, practical and transferable skills in language and learning, religious education, personal development and mutual understanding, the world around us, mathematics and numeracy and in playful approaches to science.

The Education Studies modules enable the College to be highly responsive to the diverse, contemporary challenges in schools. Modules include: learning and assessment in diverse classrooms; education research; children with special and additional needs; contemporary issues in pastoral care; playful learning and teaching in practice; working with disadvantaged learners.

Personal and professional learning modules are also provided in both programmes to prepare for and assess the students on school placements totalling thirty-six weeks over the four years of the programme.

Applications for places on the B. Ed. programmes are significantly over-subscribed with 548 primary and 225 post-primary applications in 2018. The enrolment quotas for the B. Ed. programmes are determined by Department of Education (DE) with 95 primary places and 50 post-primary places available annually.

Entry requirements have remained steady for the primary B. Ed. over recent years and are above those for post-primary. For the post-primary programmes, entry requirements vary across the four subject-based specialist pathways.

Focus of the inspection

The inspection was conducted in the terms of the *DE Circular 2010/03 Initial Teacher Education: Approval of Programmes*¹ which sets out the requirements which programmes must meet to be accredited by the GTCNI and approved by DE. The circular requires that the provision is judged by the ETI to be at least satisfactory.

In order to promote improvement in the interest of all students the inspection set out to evaluate:

- the quality of the provision and the outcomes for the students; and
- the University College's leadership and management and its capacity to effect and sustain improvement in its provision and standards.

Furthermore, the inspectors considered how well three broad themes, which reflect DE policy priorities for schools, are represented in the initial preparation of teachers:

- the extent of the students' understanding of the overarching aims, values and purposes of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) and their preparation to put their understanding into practice in schools;
- the extent to which the students recognise, understand and respond to a wide range of individual difference amongst learners in schools; and
- how well the students are being developed to take an evaluative and critical approach to teaching, assessment and learning.

Forty inspection visits to schools were conducted to evaluate the teaching of student teachers and the effectiveness of the support provided to them by College staff and host schools. The visits allowed for discussions with teacher-tutors, teachers, heads of (post-primary) subject departments and senior leaders in schools. Inspectors also reviewed the students' teaching experience folders and talked to them about their progress.

From 23rd March 2020, College campuses were closed to students, due to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. The campuses remained closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic year and online teaching of the students commenced remotely.

Through the Canvas® online environment inspectors were able to scrutinise a wide range of strategy, procedural and planning documents, course handbooks, programme and module specifications and content, teaching resources, evaluation reports, external examiners' reports and a sample of student coursework and assignments.

It became clear, due to the likely continuing impacts of the pandemic, that it would not be feasible to postpone the intended campus inspection visits, which were due to take place in April 2020, into the 2020-2021 academic year and therefore not possible to undertake first-hand inspection of the teaching provision and of the learning response on campus. It was agreed, rather than leave the approvals process in abeyance, to publish a report based on the evidence available, despite its limitations, to enable the process to proceed and avoid the risk of the B. Ed. programmes lacking continued GTCNI accreditation and DE approval.

¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201003-initial-teacher-education-approval-programmes>

However, the evidence available allows a range of strengths to be identified and a number of improvement questions for the College leadership to consider, review and to act upon in terms of the alignment of the B. Ed. curriculum with NIC requirements and the preparation of the students as beginning teachers.

As many of the findings and emerging conclusions evaluated are common to both the primary and the post-primary B. Ed. programmes they are reported in a generic way in the following report, except where explicitly referenced below.

Overall findings of the inspection of the B. Ed. Programmes

Outcomes for learners

The B. Ed. programmes are designed effectively to develop the students' knowledge and critical appraisal of the NIC. The programmes address a wide range of challenges arising for teachers from increasingly diverse school populations and prepare the students to be inclusive in their teaching response.

Programme design helps in realising the College's mission for the students and aligns well with DE's strategic priorities and the professional values in the GTCNI's teacher competency framework² and the Learning Leaders strategy³ is noticeably influential in the design and provision of the B Ed programmes.

In almost all cases, the students are progressing well to evaluate their own practice effectively, with an appropriate focus on assessing the depth of the learning and the development of their skills. Their related knowledge and understanding of the overarching aims, principles and content of the primary and post-primary curriculum is developing well.

Retention through both B. Ed. programmes is very good, with high academic standards evinced by most students attaining first class honours or second class honours upper division degree classifications, consistently year-on-year. Professional competence is also evident in the students' files, coursework and assignments where the standard in year four is increasingly reaching Master's degree level.

In school-based experience, the quality of most of the lessons inspected were good or better, with a significant minority very good or better, and with indicators of improvement as the students make progress through the four year programme.

In the best practice the student teachers create a positive, active contextualised learning environment which enables their pupils/children to learn together and from each other. In primary lessons the students focus appropriately on building thinking skills and personal capabilities and take into account the need to differentiate their teaching to ensure an inclusive approach. In post-primary classes effective questioning, good use of ICT and individual learning support helps the pupils to be clear about their learning.

In a minority of primary lessons inspected there is a need to tighten planning for differentiation and to understand better aspects of transition from the nursery to the foundation stage. In post-primary, in a minority of lessons seen, classroom management is less secure, with an undue focus on managing negative behaviours. In both phases there is a continuing need to prompt students to model the correct use of grammar when addressing the class.

² <https://gtcni.org.uk/professional-space/professional-competence/teaching-the-reflective-profession>

³ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/teaching-professional-learning-strategy>

Strong, long-established relationships between the College and partner schools and good use of personal action plans for improvement are strengths. The promotion of reflection on teaching is linked well to the GTCNI competences. The students have a good grasp of the NIC, and in particular of learning intentions, expected progression, teaching strategies and active learning methods. College staff provide high quality pastoral care and support for the students, especially for any individuals facing difficulties in their progress.

Quality of provision

The design and content of B. Ed. curriculum is coherent and developmental. It is planned to help students make a progressive transition, over four years, from being sixth-form school students (mostly, on entry) to becoming a 'leader of learning'. The incremental design ensures appropriate progression and supports well the students developing competence as a teacher. The Learning Leaders strategy is influencing the design and provision of the B. Ed. programmes. The students benefit from opportunities to investigate the role of learning leaders through their post primary subjects or specialist areas of the primary curriculum.

The GTCNI competences are embedded effectively into the individual modules and across the programme. The modules are designed to ensure that students make good progress, measured against the teacher competency framework, as well as developing their capacity to reflect critically on their own practice and to bring a crucial element of criticality to their understanding of the NIC.

The modules are supplemented well with appropriate input from current education practitioners and relevant external organisations to help widen the students' knowledge and critical appraisal of the curriculum, formal and non-formal, and of post-16 provision.

Together, the Education Studies and Curriculum Studies modules enable the College to address and respond to contemporary challenges in schools. Both programmes address very well the broader educational themes which the DE highlights as policy priorities in schools.

The students at Stranmillis University College are provided with extensive, well-designed opportunities through a degree enhancement programme to undertake a variety of additional experiences and award bearing courses that include for example: student placements in Europe and the USA; child protection certification and an optional Certificate in Religious Education validated by St Mary's University College. In addition well-established international links with Hong Kong, China and Malaysia extend experiential opportunities experience and enhance employability. In year four students also benefit from an additional, alternative two week placement to their school placement through which they gain valuable understanding of broader educational contexts.

Given the challenge of supporting learners with special needs, special education is given close attention in both programmes in a planned and progressive way. As reported in Chief Inspector's reports⁴ and with the pending implementation of SEND legislation⁵, teachers face a growing challenge in how best to respond to learners with special needs in the classroom. College leaders could consider providing the students with practical teaching advice earlier on in the B. Ed. programmes.

⁴ <https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/chief-inspectors-report-2014-2016>

<https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/chief-inspectors-report-2016-2018>

⁵ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/special-education-needs-sen-draft-regulations>

Important elements of cross-curricular ICT are addressed well in some areas of the curriculum and students are provided with opportunities to attain qualifications in cyber security, child online safety and through a Google educator certificate. The College leadership could consider the advantage of a delivery plan to embed consideration of the pedagogic role of technology consistently across all the modules.

Primary provision

The primary students benefit from opportunities to investigate the roles of learning leaders, including the role of literacy and numeracy coordinators in primary schools as well as leaders in the other areas of learning. The students are prepared well for the opportunities to engage with a wide range of leaders and co-ordinators in meaningful conversations focused on the necessary skills and the challenges involved in their roles.

The students respond reflectively to opportunities to deepen their understanding of effective pedagogy. They gain from the ongoing research undertaken by many College staff into how to secure children's progress in their learning and development. Through their improvement process, College leaders could evaluate how aspects of children's readiness to learn in nursery and primary education might be usefully built upon earlier in the programme, given the current significance of such challenges in schools, including how to evaluate the readiness of children to make an effective transition between key stages of learning.

The B. Ed. primary programme focuses appropriately on the students' understanding of children's literacy and numeracy development and thus reflects well DE's Count, Read: Succeed⁶ strategy. College leaders could consider how to balance literacy and numeracy work with other areas of learning in the primary curriculum, allowing further opportunities for students to consider how a broad and balanced primary curriculum supports the aims of DE's policy Every School a Good School⁷.

Post-primary provision

The structure of the post primary programme delivers a well-planned range of learning experiences to develop incrementally the students' skills acquisition and knowledge development.

The post-primary B. Ed. curriculum is designed for students to enrol in a main post-primary specialism for four years and for most to study a subsidiary subject for three years to broaden employment opportunities. The design intention is to prepare the student to teach the subsidiary subject to key stage 3, and in some cases to key stage 4, but not beyond.

Evaluated against the requirements necessary to teach the main subject specialism to post-16 level (for an Advanced Level, or a Level 3 vocational qualification) the curriculum design for business and enterprise, mathematics, religious studies and technology and design, together with evidence from a sample of student coursework and assignments, indicates an appropriate reflection of the curriculum expectation in schools for teaching at that level.

Taken together with the inspection evidence available, the curriculum time to prepare a student to teach across three science subjects would not be sufficient for teaching at the post-16 level. Together with questions raised in the external examiner's report about the students' progress in scientific concepts, the College's senior leaders are both alert and open to the need to keep this aspect of the provision under active review.

⁶<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/count-read-succeed-strategy-improve-outcomes-literacy-and-numeracy>

⁷ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/every-school-good-school-esags>

Furthermore, there are changing enrolment patterns over recent years for the main subject specialisms, with a marked increase in enrolments in religious studies and business and enterprise, a steady intake to technology and design, (although with lower entrance requirements) but with a marked decline in enrolments in mathematics and science which is challenging for the viability of the College's provision.

Also, higher education employment destination data is not sufficiently fine-grained to provide a source of evidence about the ultimate employment of the graduates to teach subjects at a specific level in schools and therefore does not yield the information which College leaders would need to assess the specific employment outcomes of the different subject choices made by the students.

Leadership and management

The B. Ed. programmes and the constituent modules are subject to a significant range of regulatory, evaluation, improvement and quality review and enhancement processes, both internal and external. There is first-hand evidence of the beneficial impact of external measures of effectiveness by, for example, the QAA⁸, the QUB and a range of external examiners across the programmes. The ETI inspection process also informs the self-evaluation and improvement planning of the provider. The College senior leadership actively includes the student voice, both formally and informally, gathering student feedback across the College, and ensuring student representation on the leadership team.

Arising from the internal and external improvement processes, the College reports thirteen specific quality enhancements across the two programmes in the 2019-20 academic year alone.

There is an emphasis on sustaining a culture of reflection, evaluation and continuous improvement in the College. The College is responsive to internal and external evaluation reports and recommendations to inform change and improve further the student experience.

The College places an emphasis on its engagement in the higher education research excellence framework, with many research-active lecturers. The majority of lecturers are qualified to doctorate level. There are significant elements of scholarship and research excellence within Stranmillis University College, including, but not limited to the Centre for Research into Educational Underachievement, work on early literacy development and on remote teaching and learning which have much to offer to the B. Ed. programmes. As a consequence, programme modules are distinctively research-led in their design and teaching content.

A priority is afforded to professional development for staff through, for example, opportunities based on the latest educational research to inform teaching and to further raise standards. Following a timely staff development initiative earlier in the academic year, when the campus was closed to students due to the pandemic, the staff were able to extend promptly their existing online module resources by providing live (synchronous) interactive teaching lessons for the students, including lectures, seminars, discussion groups and one-to-one tuition.

While it was not possible to evaluate the care and welfare support services provided by the College for the students on campus, evidence from the inspection of the school-based work reveals strong pastoral support for the students in line with the College's core value of *'nurturing, developing and maximizing the potential of every student'*.

⁸ QAA - The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education assesses higher education provision against a quality code <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code>

Overall findings on the Primary and Post-primary B. Ed. programmes

Where inspection evidence is available, the College has important strengths in its provision and the standards of the students' teaching in schools is mostly good and better.

The inspection team was able to identify and report to College leaders a number of emerging issues which they have both commitment and capacity to act upon in terms of the alignment of the B. Ed. curriculum with NIC requirements and the preparation of the students as beginning teachers.

This report of the findings of the inspection, with the limitations caused by the context of the coronavirus pandemic, enables the approvals and accreditation process to proceed in a timely manner.

Appendix: Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

Quantitative terms

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%

Performance levels

The ETI use the following performance levels when reporting on outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management⁹:

Outstanding
Very good
Good
Important area(s) for improvement
Requires significant improvement
Requires urgent improvement

The ETI use the following levels when reporting on care and welfare:

Impacts positively on learning, teaching and outcomes for learners
Does not impact positively enough on learning, teaching and outcomes for learners

Overall effectiveness

The ETI use one of the following inspection outcomes when evaluating the overall effectiveness of the school:

The school has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.
The school demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.
The school needs to address (an) important area(s) for improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the area(s) for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.
The school needs to address urgently the significant areas for improvement identified in the interest of all the learners. It requires external support to do so. The ETI will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the areas for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.

⁹ And the overall provision in a subject area or unit, as applicable.

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