

INITIAL TEACHER/HIGHER EDUCATION INSPECTION



Education and Training
Inspectorate

Postgraduate Certificate in Early
Years Education

Stranmillis University College, Belfast

Inspected: February 2019



The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement

Providing inspection services for:

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and other commissioning Departments



CONTENTS

Section	Page
1. Context of the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (Early Years) in Stranmillis University College	1
2. Focus of the inspection	1
3. Overall findings of the inspection	2
4. Outcomes for learners	2
5. Quality of provision	3
6. Leadership and management	4
7. Overall effectiveness	5

Appendices

A	Inspection method and evidence base
B	Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

1. Context of the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (Early Years) in Stranmillis University College

Stranmillis University College has been a provider of initial teacher education since 1922. The current full-time one year Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) in Early Years (EY) education has been offered to students since 2000 for those who wish to teach in the three to eight year-old age range. The students spend half of their course studying on campus and the other 18 weeks in school placements in nursery education, the Foundation Stage (FS) and in Key Stage (KS) 1.

The programme consists of four modules which, in addition to school placement, focus on the play-based curriculum, the KS1 curriculum and on professional development.

The programme is heavily oversubscribed for the 15 available places, as determined by the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy.

All of the students selected have already attained a high standard of academic achievement, including a core element focused on early years, to at least 2.1 honours level, together with extensive experience of working with children in the early years age range.

2. Focus of the inspection

The inspection was conducted in 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 focus of the inspection was on the early years PGCE programme, provided by Stranmillis University College.

In order to promote improvement in the interest of all students the inspection evaluated:

- 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 a number of broad themes, which reflect DE policy priorities for schools, are represented in the initial PGCE preparation of teachers.

The themes are:

- the extent of the students' understanding of the overarching aims, values and purposes of the NI 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.

Where evidence is available to report on aspects of the broad themes, they are included in this report. More detail on the purpose and method of inspection and of the evidence base is given in Appendix A.

Visits to selected schools to inspect a sample of the students' school experience were undertaken during the nursery school and FS placements; the campus inspection visit took place in the middle of the PGCE programme.

The aim of the DE Learning Leaders strategy is to, 'empower the teaching profession to strengthen its professionalism and expertise to meet the challenging educational needs of young people in the 21st century'. Therefore, the inspectors reviewed the 'opportunities and responsibilities,' (Learning Leaders: A strategy for teacher professional learning (DE, 2016, page 23)) of the strategy as they relate to student teachers. The PGCE programme, by design, enables the students to develop relevant responsibilities in an effective way for this stage of their development as teachers. Furthermore, the PGCE programme was reviewed against the expectations in the Learning Leaders strategy for 'providers of professional learning' (Ibid, page 25) and, where evidence of relevant expectations to initial teacher education was available, there was a reasonable match to the strategy.

The inspection informs the self-evaluation and improvement planning of the provider and the report contains brief illustrations of effective practice, as evaluated by the provider and validated by the ETI.

3. Overall findings of the inspection

Overall effectiveness	The provider has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners
Outcomes for learners	Outstanding
Quality of provision	Very Good
Leadership and management	Outstanding

4. Outcomes for learners

The students' prior knowledge and experience of early years provides a very sound, informed base on which they build successfully. They have a very sound understanding of the NIC, the areas of learning and how children progress in line with both the pre-school and the primary curriculum. They confidently apply their knowledge and understanding in practice in nursery and FS placements and, progress very well in developing their skills as teachers. Where they identify a gap in their experience they are proactive in selecting relevant additional placements to supplement their learning.

The students engage enthusiastically in reflective discussion about their experiences in the classroom. They have very positive attitudes to, and confidence in, the need for evidence-informed, age-appropriate approaches to learning and teaching in the early years. They debate the links between educational theory, relevant research and how it informs early year pedagogy and practice within the classroom, in line with the NIC.

The students are highly motivated and committed to preparing for a career in early years education, which is reflected in the very high attendance rate, the 100% retention rate, participation in college work and the very positive feedback provided by the schools in which they are placed. Almost all of the students in the previous year obtained a commendation or a distinction and all, in the past two years, have successfully gained employment in an early years career.

The students collaborate effectively in practical workshop assignments. They integrate very well active, playful, age-appropriate approaches to learning and teaching both in the classroom and the outdoor environment. They make clear connections in learning across the curriculum both within their high quality written assignments and in their planning for school-based work.

For the purpose of the play workshops, students are required to plan, implement and evaluate a series of playful learning experiences for Foundation Stage children in a local primary school in a socially disadvantaged area of Belfast. Students benefit greatly from these workshops, not only in terms of their ability to plan and translate into practice a variety of creative and appropriately challenging playful learning experiences across the curriculum but also in terms of their skilful interactions with the children during play in an effort to support children's holistic learning at all times. External examiners have consistently commented on the play workshops as exemplary practice noting: 'Whilst the details of this mode of assessment are specific to the programme, the task exemplifies good assessment practice in relation to a) the multimodal characteristics of the activity and b) its focus upon application of knowledge and skills to practice' (External Examiner's report).

Throughout their work, the students have very good understanding of issues relating to cognitive and physical learning needs, of newcomers and of gender. The students recognise the wide range of individual difference amongst learners in schools and are developing appropriately their understanding of how to respond to these.

The students use their digital literacy skills effectively as an integral part of their own research, independent study, for presenting evidence of assessment of children's learning and in their own classroom practice to support learning and teaching during school placement.

5. Quality of provision

A key strength is the high quality of the learning and teaching experiences provided by the tutors. All of the teaching sessions observed were effective, with almost all being very good with a third being outstanding. The tutors are very knowledgeable in their subject areas. Their skilful integration of relevant research, early years pedagogy, and a broad range of teaching approaches provides an excellent preparation for students to become well-informed and effective early practitioners. There is very good access to guidance materials and links to research, both through the virtual learning environment and the recently-updated and well-resourced library.

The programme integrates effectively understanding, knowledge and skills required in the pre-school and primary NIC with the teacher competences of the General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland (GTCNI). The students are well prepared for their school placements.

In the best practice, written and oral prompts help the students to focus their self-reflection directly on the extent of the children's learning, however, self-reflective questions need to be integrated more consistently into the tutor questioning and feedback to enable students to move from descriptive, to more consistently evaluative, statements about the children's learning.

Through an excellent variety of teaching approaches, which tutors model very well, the students are enabled to reflect on how to implement theory and practice in learning across the curriculum both in the classroom and the outdoor learning environment. Skilful questioning challenges effectively the students to think about how to overcome challenges in meeting the needs of a diverse range of children.

The PGCE students plan Outdoor Learning activities and implement them within the extensive grounds of Stranmillis University College with local primary school children. The impact of these experiences has been transformational to the students' own practice both in honing their skills to develop the children's learning in a variety of contexts and enabling them to fully understand the importance and delivery of high-quality outdoor learning with confidence. One student said 'I have become much more aware of how easily a topic originally planned for the indoors, can be brought outdoors and in turn the learning experience is transformed. I had first-hand evidence of children's enhanced creativity and team work skills being used to good effect and their problem-solving and decision-making skills were evidence throughout. Irrespective of the weather in Northern Ireland, I am determined to use the outdoors much more fully to enhance children's learning, irrespective of their age'.

The college team have appropriately identified the need to review and agree a shared understanding of the incremental assessment of GTCNI competencies in school placements and are currently trialing a number of approaches to assessment. Such an approach would address the variation in the oral and written feedback provided to students to help them articulate their strengths and identify areas for development.

The students benefit from an excellent range of enhancement opportunities provided by experienced local practitioners and organisations who work with parents, to explore important dimensions, including working in partnership with parents, issues of gender and specific aspects of special educational needs. It would be beneficial to explore more fully the role of SureStart and the importance of links with health professionals, such as speech and language therapists, in light of the increasing need for multidisciplinary approaches to address barriers to young children's learning.

A comprehensive student support and well-being strategy promotes very effectively an integrated approach to academic support, physical and mental health and emotional and psychological well-being all of which impacts positively on the care and welfare of the students.

6. Leadership and management

The senior leaders provide a clear strategic vision for leading and driving forward innovative professional practice. It is very evident, throughout the early years programme at all levels, that the tutors share a commitment to advocating the place of high quality research to inform teaching and learning.

All of the staff are involved actively in research and doctoral projects. An impact case study into the College's research into early years play was rated as 'internationally excellent' in the research excellence framework amongst UK higher education institutions. More widely, the staff influence educational practice in early years education through the dissemination of their work to practitioners, policy-makers and the academic community.

The senior leaders have established effective links with a wide range of local, national and international schools and institutions which encourages very well professional debate among students and staff on early years issues in a wider educational context.

A range of professionals from the three phases of Pre-School, Foundation Stage and Key Stage One, including experienced early years teachers and PGCE graduates, are invited to share with students various aspects of outstanding practice such as working with parents, newcomer children, gender identity, Apple Education and SCRATCH. Each year students report favourably on these experiences, commenting particularly on their relevance for enhancing their competence and understanding of innovative classroom pedagogies in a very interesting and enjoyable manner. Student comments include 'having guest speakers in was really useful for practical guidance', 'visits to other settings were really valuable to see outstanding practice in evidence' and 'some of the speakers really made us think outside the box and gave us a different perspective'.

A very strong sense of collegiality, excellent working relationships, collaboration, sharing of practice and a student-centered ethos is evident at all levels. The students report that they are valued, supported and have a voice that is both listened to and acted upon.

There is clear evidence of effective review and self-evaluation leading to improvements in provision, outcomes and in leadership and management. Improvement processes are underpinned by extensive consultation with students, staff and a wide range of stakeholders. The inspection confirms the timeliness of planned actions to enhance further moderation processes which bear on the consistency of learning and teaching.

7. Overall effectiveness

The provider has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners.

Inspection methodology and evidence base

The inspection 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. In order to meet the standard of being at least *satisfactory* as evaluated by the ETI (as set out in the Circular), the provision may have some areas for improvement which are judged by the ETI to be within the capacity of the provider to amend, but must not require significant or urgent improvement in any aspect.

The ETI document [Self-evaluation and inspection of initial teacher education provision](#) (ETI 2018) sets out the approach for the inspection in more detail.

In advance of the visit, the provider produced a portfolio for the reaccreditation process as required by for the General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland (GTCNI).

Tutors were also invited to identify and describe briefly instances of good practice which illustrate aspects of the self-evaluation and inspection framework. A selection of these is included in this report.

The ETI inspected a small sample of three school experience sessions and observed the assessment of and feedback to the students. The visits to schools also allowed for a range of informal talks with, for example, teachers and principals.

In the week of 11 February 2019 a small team of inspectors carried out a campus-based inspection at Stranmillis University College. The inspectors observed first-hand 11 sessions taught by nine academic staff ranging across lectures, seminars and practical workshops. They talked, formally and informally, to a selection of students and lecturers; discussed samples of the students' work with the students concerned; attended leadership meetings and discussions; scrutinised policy, planning, quality assurance and evaluation documents; and reviewed the resources, including the provision for learning online.

Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

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 management (and the overall provision in a subject area or unit, as applicable):

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 provider for this programme:

The provider has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners.

The provider demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the learners.

The provider 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 provider 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.

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