

How do we achieve the third space? The challenges and strengths of partnership working to deliver a flexible PGCE Programme in Wales

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ABSTRACT

Wales has devolved powers for education and training. There has been much focus on the quality of education and related factors in Wales in recent years. The nation's education system is shifting from a 'managerial' one to being based more on trust and professionalism. It is increasingly recognised that the efforts being made to ensure this educational reform is coherent and effectively communicated are successfully progressing. Reforms to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Wales provide examples of this successful progress. The leadership and management of ITE programmes are now led by partnerships of a university working in collaboration with lead partner schools. The new two-year flexible distance learning approach of The Open University Partnership in Wales PGCE Programme demonstrates such success, with students studying on a part-time or salaried PGCE. Third space theory is applied to consider how truly effective and fair collaborative partnership working is achieved. Twenty stakeholders gave their views on the challenges and strengths of the new Open University Partnership during the development and early implementation stage. The early challenges focus on processes, such as communication issues and the number of programme documents. It was recognised that the global Covid-19 pandemic has been a contributory factor for some of the concerns raised. The strengths of a clear shared vision, co-construction of programme materials and collaborative governance indicate the positive progress the

new PGCE programme is making towards existing in the ‘third space’. This study offers important learning for the partnership concerned and for others to consider as partnership working between schools and universities gains momentum within ITE.

Keywords: Initial Teacher Education, Partnership, Third space, Wales

Introduction

The Welsh Government has grown into the responsibility of exercising its devolved powers for education generally, and to teacher education specifically in Wales since devolution in 1999 (Reid and Tanner, 2012). Changes to education generally, and to teacher education in Wales, such as the moves towards a more ‘progressive curriculum’ continue. These changes contribute to the development and/or endorsement of the nation’s identity within the four UK nations (Power, 2016: 290; Bamber *et al.*, 2016; Beauchamp *et al.*, 2015; Davies *et al.*, 2016). However, disappointing PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) scores in 2009 provided impetus for the Welsh Government to prioritise education policies further and begin education reform (OECD, 2014). The Welsh Government began implementing a new school curriculum in September 2022. The new Initial Teacher Education (ITE) arrangement is also one of the major changes that is part of the education reform. These reforms aim to support the delivery of ‘a high-quality education profession’, ‘inspirational leaders working collaboratively’, ‘strong and inclusive schools’ and ‘robust assessment, evaluation and accountability’ in a self-improving system (Welsh Government, 2017a: 3). Delivering ITE via school and university partnerships forms a critical element of the reform. This qualitative case study aims to use the ‘third space’ concept to examine the challenges and strengths of implementing teacher education via the new Open University Partnership’s flexible two-year PGCE Programme.¹

1 Two pathways are offered: 1. Student teachers are self-funded, with the part-time PGCE allowing student teachers to combine study with other commitments. 2. Student teachers are employed full-time at a school and the cost of their study is supported by a Welsh Government training grant for the two-year salaried PGCE.

Curriculum reform is at the centre of the ongoing education change in Wales. Ensuring a capable and high-quality teaching profession is critical. Some examples of the impact of the education reforms on the teacher workforce include: 1) strengthening the quality and procurement process of supply teachers, ii) the implementation of the Professional Learning Passport for all practitioners to use to reflect on their development activities, and iii) the increased focus on the Welsh language via the Welsh language sabbatical scheme and Welsh-medium PGCE to support the Welsh Government's target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2017c). The recruitment and retention of teachers are also core elements of the Welsh Government's workforce development plan. This notes that the new alternative routes into teaching delivered by The Open University are 'designed to revolutionise the way ITE is provided in Wales' (Welsh Government, 2019b: 29). Research supports the Welsh Government's approach. Effective strategies for improving teacher education are reported to include i). high-quality programmes, ii). financial subsidies, iii). theory and practice connected by integrating work in settings, iv). aligning work to professional standards and v). close proactive relationships with schools as priorities. All of these are reflected in the ITE reforms in Wales (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2017; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017).

Partnership working in teacher education

Partnership working in teacher education is often highly valued and a range of approaches exist (Lillejord and Børte, 2016; Handscomb, Gu and Varley, 2014; Fancourt, Edwards, and Menter, 2015). The perceived ability of these partnerships to bridge the divide between theory and practice underpins the continued drive to improve school-university partnership working in teacher education (Green, Tindal-Ford and Eady, 2020). However, the approaches adopted by schools and universities to integrate their delivery of ITE has changed over time. From student teachers spending some time in schools to schools becoming more responsible for the planning and management of courses (Douglas, 2011; Holen and Yunk, 2014). Nevertheless, the nature of the structure of partnership working in teacher education still varies between the hierarchical or more collaborative partnership approach (Mauri *et al.*, 2019; Green, Tindal-Ford and Eady, 2020). It is frequently argued that most partnership working between

schools and universities for teacher education is ‘hierarchical’, with the university instigating the knowledge transfer (Furlong, 2019; Lillejord and Børte, 2016: 551).

However, the new ITE partnerships in Wales are required to include ‘lead partnership schools’ (Welsh Government, 2018: 5). These schools are expected to fully contribute to the ITE programme, which includes quality assurance and self-evaluation. The effectiveness of the partnership working will also form part of the inspection process for schools, with the impact on school leadership, teaching and professional learning critical (Estyn, 2019). A recent examination of school-university partnerships in Ireland concluded the need to ‘forge new identities’ and ‘joint ownership’ (Heinz and Fleming, 2019: 1304). This is critical for the new Open University Partnership PGCE Programme as it is suggested there is a need to address existing identities, power relations and contractual responsibilities and ensure support is reciprocal (Heinz and Fleming, 2019). According to some, the new ITE partnerships in Wales are proving to be more consistent in developing the teacher workforce (Murphy, 2020). Schools and universities are now jointly responsible for conceptualising ITE programmes. As a result, developing the curriculum and contributing to the teaching of ITE programmes in Wales are ‘now ‘practical’ and ‘intellectual’ (Furlong, 2020: 39).

Initial Teacher Education in Wales

A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) review concludes that although progress in the implementation of the education reforms in Wales is evident, positioning schools and communities at the centre will be crucial for the continued co-construction process to be successful (OECD, 2020). Others believe that this is happening, with transformative partnerships between schools and universities resulting in very effective partnerships developing (Waters, 2020). It is also proposed that developing such partnerships has been positive in Wales. Commitment is demonstrated to build capacity in the teaching workforce, with the close integration of theory and practice that is expected (Mutton and Burn, 2020).

The range of ITE programmes accredited to deliver teacher training in Wales since 2019 reflects the progress in positioning schools and communities at the centre of the process. For example, effective collaborative

partnership working between two universities, a regional improvement service and schools for the CaBan partnership (Griffiths *et al.*, 2020). The centrality of research is emphasised by other ITE programmes. For instance, the embedding of research dispositions across the PGCE programme design for the Athrofa Professional Learning Partnership (Waters and Sharpling, 2020). The integral role of the school-based ‘research champion’ for the Cardiff Partnership, and the University of South Wales Initial Teacher Education Partnership emphasises its intention to establish career-long professional learning (Pugh *et al.*, 2020: 178; Daly *et al.*, 2020). The integrated AberTeach PGCE provides all student teachers with the opportunity to teach across both the primary and secondary phases (Thomas *et al.*, 2020). This discussion contributes to the wider examination of the range of ITE approaches offered in Wales.

One of the key priorities of the Welsh Government’s vision for education in Wales was for a workforce underpinned with a robust pedagogy. ITE is expected to contribute to this (Welsh Government, 2014). The curriculum reforms stress the importance of collaboration between schools and partnership working as an indicator of success. However, at the same time the implications for workforce capacity and capability are recognised (Donaldson, 2015). The training for new teachers to achieve ‘a new kind of teacher professionalism’ is stated as the goal (Furlong, 2015: 7). However, Furlong (2015) also commented that with teacher education primarily university led in Wales the sector is not well served, with a lack of support for teacher educators. Estyn (2016) reinforced this view suggesting that improving the quality of mentoring would be of benefit to all routes into teaching. In the drive to improve teacher quality other key elements of the education reform in Wales include: i) the revision of the teaching standards (Welsh Government, 2017b), ii) the revision of the accreditation process for ITE providers (Welsh Government, 2018), iii) a raised profile of research in ITE (Perry *et al.*, 2017) and iv) the introduction of a competitive tendering process to address some of Furlong’s ITE improvement recommendations (Furlong, 2015).

Expanding ITE routes and offering flexibility in the way a programme is delivered, such as blended learning, online learning, distance learning and part-time study, are promoted as key to attracting potential student teachers and improving the diversity of the teacher workforce in Wales (Harris *et al.*, 2019). Close partnership working between universities and schools is essential for the required ‘situated learning’ to develop, with all partners jointly responsible for conceptualisation, management, and

teaching (Furlong *et al.*, 2021: 64). However, some of the challenges for teacher education in Wales have included a tension between a school-based model and broader professional development. Additionally, it is vital that high-quality teachers and teacher educators are attracted and retained. Value needs to be awarded to the opportunity for more diverse routes into the teaching profession. Also, ITE should be encouraged to respond in an agile way to future policy developments (Grigg and Egan, 2020; Harris *et al.*, 2019). The Open University Partnership PGCE Programme presents an example of how the ITE sector in Wales is successfully responding to policy drivers such as strengthening partnership working and diversifying the teacher workforce. Therefore, this paper provides an important opportunity, using a case study approach, to provide insight into the challenges and strengths of the early implementation of a school/university ITE partnership.

The Open University Partnership in Wales PGCE Programme

The Open University has an established reputation for supporting teacher education in Wales; it first delivered a flexible route into teaching in 1992 (Hutchinson, 2006). A programme was offered across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland until 2008. This programme made a significant contribution to widening participation in teacher training (Hutchinson, 2006). The more recent Open University Partnership in Wales PGCE Programme launched in 2020. This provides training that is intellectually challenging and rigorously practical, accredited against the new criteria for ITE in Wales (Welsh Government, 2018). The PGCE is for primary and secondary student teachers to study part-time or salaried over two years and adopts flexible distance and blended learning. Both pathways include 60 credits of Masters-level study. Student teachers complete practice days in schools supported by teachers in their roles as mentors and practice tutors. The ‘traditional’ university delivery is achieved through a combination of online study materials and live online seminars with an Open University curriculum tutor, resulting in a blended learning experience.

Two key principles underpin the new PGCE. The student teacher’s professional knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the student and learners, their mentor, their curriculum tutor, fellow students and a practice tutor. The practice tutor is a member of staff based in a lead partner school with a similar role to that of a university tutor on a

face-to-face programme and visits student teachers within a cluster of schools. Each member of this community brings a different perspective. Secondly, the student-teacher's learning is a complex and individual process supported by the community. As the result of the student teacher working within a community, the community has potential to learn and develop too.

The programme is further underpinned by developing effective pedagogy through practice (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999). This promotes student teachers' development of knowledge within the context of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998). The community of practice for the PGCE student is represented by their school community and the professionals working with them to support their development. They help them to link theory and practice, and at the same time deepen their own understanding as they have a shared interest and regularly interact (Wenger, McDermott, and Synder, 2002). Student teachers' 'personal constructs' are at the centre of the dynamic process of the different aspects of professional knowledge. These are a complex amalgam of past knowledge, experiences of learning, a personal view of what constitutes 'good' teaching and their belief in the purposes of what they see in the curriculum or in their subject and why they wish to teach it. 'Research-informed clinical practice' refers to the application of the knowledge student teachers gain within the university context and school context. They apply this and explore it further within the practice of their teaching (Burn and Mutton, 2015: 217). This creates a safe space for student teachers to test theory within the context of practice as they engage in 'practical theorising' (Hagger and McIntyre, 2006: 59). This is key to understanding the interplay between the different types of knowledge in the different contexts. Benefits for both student teachers and their mentors are evident as a result of such collaboration (BERA-RSA, 2014; Cordingley, 2015). With collaboration and shared responsibility critical to effective partnership working, using third space theory to examine the partnership will provide an indication of the progress towards an equal partnership for ITE.

Third space theory and teacher education

Even though most ITE programmes include frequent opportunities for school experiences, there has been persistent acknowledgement that the ability of teacher education programmes to connect the university

experience and school experience has often been lacking (Flessner, 2014; Klein *et al.*, 2013; Zeichner, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Third space theory is increasingly proposed as a concept to support the closing of this gap between theory and practice in teacher education (Beck, 2020; Forgasz *et al.*, 2020, Green, Tindall-Ford and Eady, 2020; Jackson and Burch, 2019; Beck, 2016, Zeichner, 2010). Third space theory originates from Bhabha's (1994) ideas where hierarchy and binaries do not exist if the third space is occupied. This means collaboration is more equal and fair. The third space 'displaces the histories' that it comprises and new authorities are established in the continually evolving 'space' (Rutherford, 1990: 211). The third space is also referred to as a 'hybrid space' that is informed and influenced by the knowledge and dialogue of the partners involved, where collaboration and joint planning take place (Bernay *et al.*, 2020: 139; Handscomb, Gu and Varley, 2014: 5; Gutiérrez, 2008; Moje *et al.*, 2004; Soja, 1996).

It is proposed that by participating in both the university and school environments each is informed and influenced by the other and the third space emerges. It is here that the new ways of educating teachers are realised (Flessner, 2014). The third space is 'not an either/or space but an and/also place' (Taylor, Klein, and Abrams, 2014: 4). The third space is created to 'bridge the gap' and benefit all those participating (Burn *et al.*, 2020: 2). It is proposed that school and university partnerships move through six levels as they create mutually beneficial learning opportunities. It is not until level five that decision making is shared, and level six when all aspects of programmes are truly co-constructed. These types of relationships can take years to develop the trust that is required (Burroughs *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the following discussion will establish the initial progress the new PGCE Programme is making towards working in the third space, where a non-hierarchical approach and truly equal partnership exists. To determine this, a brief overview of the success factors needed to deliver effective partnership working proposed in the literature is presented. Following this the early challenges and strengths experienced by The Open University Partnership in Wales PGCE Programme are reported.

Successful partnerships in teacher education

The main characteristics of successful partnerships in teacher education include i). mutual trust and respect, ii). shared responsibility with effective joint planning and working, and iii). clarity of communication. ITE also

needs to strategically fit with partners' goals. Engaged leadership, the contribution of time and funding and the role of monitoring and evaluation are also raised by some. Building effective teacher education partnerships is reliant on 'mutual trust' and an agreed shared vision (Bernay *et al.*, 2020: 145; Thomas *et al.*, 2020; Carter, 2015; Handscomb, 2014: 5; Walsh and Backe, 2013). It is proposed that if vulnerability exists this can help to build the trust and respect and bridge the divide between the university and the school (Arhar *et al.*, 2013; Simon, 2009). This ultimately creates a unique culture for the partnership where the differences between universities and schools provide creativity as opposed to disagreement (Handscomb, 2014). Others support this view reporting that mutual respect provides the foundation for building relationships in a partnership (Burroughs *et al.*, 2020). However, others comment that even though developing deeper relationships between a university and schools helps to build collegiality, trust tensions can arise regarding confidentiality (Heinz and Fleming, 2019). There is evidence of distrust being sometimes apparent (Lillejord and Børte, 2016). Also, if the overriding aim is to ensure the trusting relationship, to prevent upset challenge and criticality may be intentionally avoided. A consequence of this could be that creativity is hindered (Midthassel, 2017).

Clarity of the shared responsibilities, that are clearly communicated, and the cooperation needed for collaborative working are also key (Burroughs *et al.*, 2020; Green, Tindall-Ford and Eady, 2020; European Commission, 2015). It is also noted that having non-hierarchical relationships where the roles and responsibilities are understood by all involved in the partnership is essential (Bernay *et al.*, 2020). When this exists, it is evident that the involvement of shared responsibility and ownership focused on improving the preparation of new teachers is the priority (Holen and Yunk, 2014; MacDougall *et al.*, 2013). In some cases, this has been achieved by rotating the role of chair for committees (Vandyck *et al.*, 2012). Evidence drawn from previous ITE developments in Wales reinforce the significance of ensuring roles are clearly defined from the outset (Grigg and Egan, 2020). However, it is also suggested that joint working will involve changes in mindset and work culture (European Commission, 2015). If achieved this can result in enriching all those involved, most importantly the student teachers (Furlong, 2019). Others who have investigated similar approaches to partnership working also note the ambitious nature of what is required particularly when trying to 'work together' as opposed to 'work with'; they suggest that this can take time to progress successfully (Burroughs *et al.*, 2020; Green, Tindall-Ford and Eady, 2020; Handscomb, Gu and

Varley, 2014; Burch and Jackson, 2013: 65). Yet, opportunities to communicate with partners can positively impact the partnership working relationship (Heinz and Fleming, 2019). The ITE accreditation criteria in Wales particularly state the importance of joint planning (Welsh Government, 2018). Joint engagement in this process will ensure the coherence required (Furlong, 2019; Estyn, 2019). The university-school partnerships delivering across Wales are reported to be providing the time and resources which does reflect the work involved in developing and implementing the new partnership model in Wales (Furlong, 2020).

Including schools in the leadership aspects of partnerships alongside the university is critical to steering the direction of partnership working (Passy, Georgeson and Gompertz, 2018; Carter, 2015; Arhar, 2013). Yet, the role of leadership is perhaps more complex than this. The leaders need vision to support coherence and success and distributed leadership emerges to fulfil the practicalities of partnership roles and tasks as they are required (Handscomb, Gu and Varley, 2014). There is also a drive to embed the leadership in the new ITE partnerships in Wales. Schools are to be evaluated on their leadership role by the inspectorate (Estyn, 2019). This echoes the findings of a mapping exercise of teacher education partnerships, that strong academic leadership and engaged school leadership are critical for new partnership models (Lillejord and Børte, 2016). It is also noted that the hard work and leadership required to construct and maintain the 'third space' needs to be acknowledged (Dickson, 2020: 261). Others stress the importance of the university leadership in the partnership. This is illustrated by the cultivation of a motivated and active partnership (Grigg and Egan, 2020). It has been proposed that there is potential for a separate professional body to provide support to develop such ITE partnership leadership roles (Egan and Grigg, 2020).

Monitoring and evaluation of partnerships can help to measure effectiveness and inform wider policy (Walsh and Backe, 2013; Handscomb, Gu and Varley, 2014). This accountability can drive teacher education reform (Cochran-Smith, 2020). The joint accountability of the new ITE partnerships in Wales is expected to raise the quality of ITE (Furlong, 2019; Cochran-Smith, 2020). These expectations placed on all ITE providers in Wales are very clear (Welsh Government, 2018). In some cases, this accountability is viewed as needing to be more democratic, with partnership stakeholders 'owning' a democratic and strong internal accountability which avoids 'high stakes external accountability' (Thomas *et al.*, 2020: 133). It is proposed that the education bodies in Wales work

together to achieve this way of working (Thomas *et al.*, 2020). The following discussion draws on reflections of the development, accreditation process and early implementation of the new Open University Partnership in Wales PGCE Programme to distil emerging challenges and strengths and to begin to explore the extent to which the Partnership is working towards inhabiting the third space.

Partnership working in practice

To develop an understanding of the extent to which the new partnership is progressing to work in the third space a qualitative case study approach was adopted. This applied purposive sampling and gathered data from 20 stakeholders involved in the development and delivery for the new partnership. Table 1 is a summary of the roles and affiliations of contributors. The stakeholders involved in the development and early implementation of the PGCE Programme were invited to contribute their experiences and views. These contributions were gathered either via email responses (17) or telephone interviews (3), depending on the stakeholders' preference. The main themes included in the questions focused on:

1. Motivation for participating in the PGCE Programme.
2. Role during the development and accreditation process, and reflections on tasks.
3. What worked well and what were the challenges during the development and accreditation process.
4. Potential key enablers and future barriers for the delivery of the programme.

Qualitative analysis software (NVivo) was used to manage and support the data analysis. This allowed for the data to be initially coded at broad themes determined by the questions. For example, challenges, enablers, which were then later refined to produce sub-themes such as communication, bilingualism or relationships (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019).

Using the case study approach is a flexible methodology and allows for the capture of the different elements that contribute to a 'phenomenon' (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016: 37). This develops an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system, which in this case is the Partnership (Timmons and Cairns, 2010). This qualitative understanding is

Table 1: The stakeholders, who provided their views on the development and delivery of the new partnership.

<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Number</i>
The Open University in Wales	Management	4
	Operations	4
	Academic	4
Primary schools	Practice Tutor	2
Secondary schools	Practice Tutor	2
Regional Education Consortia	Representative on PGCE Partnership	4*

*There are four Regional Education Consortia in Wales – they submitted a combined response.

determined by the experience of the Partnership as it occurs in its context and situation (Stake, 2006). A case study is well-suited to examining the new process of evolving an equal approach to partnership working in ITE and progress towards occupying the third space (Gray, 2018).

Before the challenges and strengths are explored separately, Table 2 provides an overview of the key themes reported by stakeholders. It is apparent that investigating these in more depth is critical as both strengths and challenges are reported for each theme. It is important to note that the majority of feedback received focused on operational aspects of partnership working, with limited comment on pedagogy. This is perhaps not surprising considering the shifting priorities for the Partnership due to the impact of Covid-19. The small-scale nature of this case study also presents its own limitations. This includes the relatively low proportion of lead partner school contributions when compared to those from the university partner. However, the early development of the partnership involved seven lead school partners and it was these who were invited to contribute. It is important for all partnership working to build on identified strengths to inform improvement.

Challenges

The stakeholders involved in The Open University Partnership in Wales provided comment on the challenges of partnership working. Concerns

Table 2: An overview of the main challenges and strengths identified by partnership stakeholders.

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Strengths</i>
Roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understanding others' roles in the partnership• Understanding of distance learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High-quality personnel
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Building relationships at a distance (particularly during COVID-19)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Effective collaboration/co-construction• Positive Welsh Government support
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rapid deployment and familiarisation of ICT systems• Ensuring Bilingualism embedded• Communicating the programme processes effectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Efficient Open University systems• Efficient communication across the partnership• Clear vision for the partnership
Resources/time	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Large volume of material	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Informed by existing materials/resources• Adequate preparation time

raised included i). the challenge for partner schools to find the time to familiarise themselves with the extensive amount of new information, ii). ensuring bilingualism is embedded and iii). building effective relationships over a relatively short period of time. This also resulted in communication challenges, both within the university and externally. This meant guaranteeing effective information sharing was challenging. However, these issues were sometimes caused or exacerbated by Covid-19. School and university staff had to make a quick pivot to online working, sometimes outside of systems they would ordinarily have access to, or using new and unfamiliar software to facilitate online working. New material had to be developed quickly to support necessary programme changes. Across the Partnership, staff had to quickly develop new ICT competences to work effectively in an unfamiliar online environment. School based and university staff also reported higher levels of workload than usual. This also

impacted on the ability of some staff to find time to engage both with new systems and concepts. Understanding the distance learning concept of the programme and ensuring clarity in the job roles and responsibilities were also challenging to communicate to all involved. The challenges discussed here are similar to those experienced by other ITE and higher education providers (Eady, Green and Capocchiano, 2021; Watermeyer *et al.*, 2021).

As discussed later, communication between stakeholders was highlighted as a strength. However, it was also raised as a challenge by a third of the stakeholders. As discussed in the following section, the vision and underpinning theory for the Partnership's model of ITE was clear. However, seven of the stakeholders commented that the practical and paperwork requirements of the programme were less well understood by some partner schools. This could be attributed to the remote working patterns of all involved during Covid-19. It could also be attributed to the volume and accessibility of key information placed on the online forum, as commented by one school representative;

The volume of new material being presented very quickly has also been a challenge. There was a lot for schools to read and familiarise themselves with and this has felt a bit overwhelming at times.

These findings reinforce those of Burroughs *et al.* (2020) and Green, Tindall-Ford and Eady (2020). Clear communication is critical for successful collaborative working. However, it is recognised that this can take time to emerge (Handscomb, Gu and Varley, 2014; Burch and Jackson, 2013). The school university partnership discussed here is in its infancy. Nevertheless, findings indicate a positive start and acknowledge the commitment required for such partnerships to develop and maintain the 'third space' (Dickson, 2020). This was reiterated by one Regional Education Consortium representative who commented that 'communication was challenging due to the pace of development of the programme'. Due to the everchanging Covid-19 situation, rapid, unavoidable changes to the practical experience for the student teachers were required. However, these modifications further increased workload and created additional pressure for university staff and partner schools. Opportunities for communication were less frequent, as schools requested shorter Partnership meetings and training events. There were long periods of time with fewer meetings. This meant some partner schools were left feeling, if not being, 'out of the loop'. When meetings were held, a lot of important content was included. However, this resulted in some meetings

being long in duration and heavy in detail. As a result, practice tutors were sometimes unclear if the information was new due to the nature of the programme or due to the pandemic. They reported that they felt conflicted between their commitment to support the student teachers and their primary role within their own school setting.

Undoubtedly increased workload and lack of release time due to Covid-19 was an exacerbating factor for the launch of a new ITE programme. Whilst the university felt it was consistent in its use of the forums as a means of communication, school partners felt the communication strategy for the programme was at times over complicated. This led to a feeling of ‘Where do I look?’. In turn, this put additional pressure on The Open University curriculum tutors. One commented they were spending a significant amount of time ‘explaining things to school partners that had already been explained during training sessions or in the school partner forums’. Such concerns reflect the importance of effective opportunities for communication across a partnership that culminate in a positive influence for the partnership’s working relationship (Heinz and Fleming, 2019).

The Open University Partnership PGCE is primarily delivered in an online format. However, it was commented by two stakeholders that some positive aspects of face-to-face provision have been harder to replicate online. Developing relationships via such face to face connections is important for effective working and learning (Jeong, 2018; Şentürk 2021). Yet, the momentum forced on the online format as a consequence of Covid-19 does mean that people are becoming more receptive to this now (Radha *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, mentors referred positively to their school representatives about the benefits of the social networking and informal face to face conversations that take place during coffee breaks, or before and after, training events. This informal ‘chat’ builds a sense of shared experience and community. This allows people to discuss concerns that they may not feel comfortable raising during a formal online training event. Emphasising the findings of Heinz and Fleming (2019), one school representative reflected on the challenge of ‘getting to know everyone and build purposeful working relationships in a very short space of time’. Online forums try to facilitate this relationship building. Yet, posting thoughts on a public sharing platform can be daunting for those who might not want to commit their thoughts to writing, or who need human interaction to build positive connections (Verenikina, Jones, and Delahunty, 2017; Delahunty, 2018; Tang and Hew, 2020). Also, online conversations between large groups using online platforms can be harder

to engage with. The conversation can be less fluid. A consequence of this was that some schools instigated their own direct contact with a neighbouring school to ask for ‘buddy’ support. This view resonated with one school ‘it has felt a bit isolated at times [...] building greater connections between local partnership schools may have helped with this, as you draw on each other for support’. The school coordinator in one school was happy to support another school that they already had an existing working relationship with.

Two school representatives also commented on the delay experienced by some student teachers in receiving their personal login details. Early difficulties encountered using The Open University e-portfolio system used to store their evidence were also reported. Such challenges, in addition to encountering difficulties in locating key resources on the system, navigating the lesson capture platform and general IT accessibility challenges, highlight that IT is an area for improvement. Nevertheless, the university responded swiftly to specific IT concerns. It made a transition to a new online software package in time for the programme’s second module. It also developed new job descriptions outlining roles and responsibilities and checklists with key dates. However, partner schools reported that some student teachers were confused as to how to access most frequently used files such as mentor session and observation forms. This was partly due to the way the files and documents had been categorised and partly due to the volume of files.

This experience illustrates how important it is for IT systems to be effective from the outset. If this is not the case it can negatively impact users and the working relationship needed for partnerships to be successful (Burroughs *et al.*, 2020; Handscomb, Gu and Varley, 2014). A large volume of written material was produced to support The Open University Partnership’s delivery, and as noted above some schools reported feeling ‘overwhelmed’ by this. Two school representatives reported the feeling that too much content was being shared without a clear understanding of what they were expected to focus on. It is possible that some of this is attributable to the reduction of training sessions. Also, launching the programme during Covid-19 undoubtedly added pressure. It has been a period when school-based staff have been impacted by an increase in workload. This led to time pressure and the added complication of needing to become familiar with several new IT systems. As the university has responded quickly to feedback from partners, and made improvements, this bodes well for the future.

Strengths

The strengths of partnership working were also reported by stakeholders. These are summarised in Table 2. Strengths included i). the value of the ongoing strategic support from the Welsh Government, ii). the importance of high-quality personnel contributing to the development and implementation of the programme, iii). a clearly communicated vision and iv). strong co-construction of the programme from the start with supportive communities of practice, v). sufficient time available to prepare for the programme's accreditation, vi). collaborative working, and vii). efficient communication. The important roles for partner school staff who were directly involved in developing the course content were also mentioned. The part-time and salaried nature of the PGCE, alongside the flexible online learning approach means that widening access to the teaching profession is at the forefront. The following discusses the more prominent strengths reported.

From the first Open University Partnership meeting, there was clear communication of the vision for the PGCE programme and the student teacher experience. This vision, shared by The Open University PGCE team, supports the National Mission (Welsh Government, 2017a). This built on the recommendations from previous teacher training reviews and addressed the recommendations of the Furlong report (2015). Four stakeholders reaffirmed the clarity in the communication of the vision, these included both school and Open University representatives. This immediate sense of inclusion experienced by the lead partner schools related to all aspects of the programme's development and contributes to the creation of the third space (Jackson and Burch 2019). One school representative explained that the shared vision provided a strong foundation for workshops. These workshops discussed the advantages and disadvantages of proposed programme timelines and the roles for key staff. They also explained that co-construction of the job descriptions ensured that members of the Partnership were clear about their responsibilities, the expectations at each level and how they could contribute to realising the vision for ITE. All of these activities are critical to the development of strong school-university ITE partnerships, as they ensure opportunities for trust to develop (Bernay *et al.*, 2020; Thomas *et al.*, 2020).

Through the co-construction of the programme a creative approach to ITE has been fostered and a strong climate of trust. Here schools feel they are valued as an integral part of teacher education. This is key in the

development of effective collaborative working relationships (Handscomb, 2014; Burroughs *et al.*, 2020). The close partnership is beneficial to all stakeholders as it ensures the programme's vision is realised in practice and an integrated experience for the students is delivered. Furthermore, close partnership working with the wider education system encourages the development of Schools as Learning Organisations (OECD, 2018). This provides opportunities to learn with and from the larger learning system. As commented by one Open University representative, there is 'genuine interest in each other's perspective and the constraints each party faces' with it recognised that some schools are strongly committed to 'ITE as a mechanism for school improvement'. Similar views were discovered when school-university partnerships in Ireland were examined (Heinz and Fleming, 2019). Murphy (2020) also reports that this is becoming evident across the Welsh ITE sector.

The development and delivery of The Open University Partnership in Wales PGCE coincides with the education reform journey currently underway in Wales. This includes the roll out of the new Curriculum for Wales and has led to the PGCE programme's vision and content reflecting current policy and practice in Wales. School representatives reported that student teachers who study this PGCE will be well prepared to make the most of the opportunities and tackle the challenges of designing and delivering a bespoke curriculum. The creation of highly effective communities of practice are the foundation of the PGCE. The importance of this approach is critical for effective ITE (OECD, 2020; Griffiths *et al.*, 2020). Within these communities students can develop their own personal construct of what it means to be a teacher (McLean Davies *et al.*, 2013). The close collaboration between partner schools and The Open University demonstrates the transformative nature of partnership working and one school representative reported this as a genuine strength of the programme. High-quality partnerships are being developed. For instance, one partner school reported they believe the role provides equal responsibility for teacher education and professional learning that is facilitated through 'a genuine sharing of expertise between professionals'. The importance of this aspect is confirmed by others. Equal responsibility for leadership is a central element for successful partnerships (Passy, Georgeson and Gompetz, 2018; Carter, 2015).

The partnership working across the lead partner schools and with the Regional Education Consortia was supported with a weekend retreat for school staff. One partner school reported that this event allowed them to

'be genuinely immersed in the course' and the world of ITE. Another partner school commented that the weekend retreat was an invaluable opportunity for everyone to 'understand the theory that forms the foundations of the programme'. Participants were funded directly to attend, as opposed to the funding going through their school. It offered opportunity to reflect on how the key elements of high-quality ITE provision can be achieved in practice. The joint planning that this process required is key in ensuring consistency in ITE (Welsh Government, 2018; Furlong, 2019). During the weekend retreat practitioners co-developed proformas such as lesson observation forms and lesson planning documents. Job descriptions, mentor and practice tutor handbooks were also co-constructed.

Another strength of the partnership working reported by some stakeholders, and explored in depth by one school representative is the effective creation of the sub-committees. These are strategic and operational sub-groups of the main partnership committee, formed of members from across the partnership. The sub-committees ensure that the ongoing reflection, evaluation, and innovation of the programme is a shared experience, and that partners work together (Green, Tindall-Ford and Eady, 2020; Handscomb, Gu and Varley, 2014). The sub-committee meetings provide continuous, focused time for reflection on the quality of ITE provision in schools and collaboration between partners. The school representative commented that the sub-committees create a strong feedback loop and provide a platform for equitable decision making. Shared ownership brings with it shared accountability. Schools have an equal responsibility for quality assurance through both internal and external processes. As commented by the school representative:

As a lead partnership school, we have been involved in the Partnership Committee meetings and [I am a member of a] sub-committee. I think these meetings are key to the successful running of the programme as they provide that face to face contact (albeit virtual), the opportunity to highlight issues that happen 'on the ground' and give time for reflection. Feeling that the experiences of schools are listened to and acted upon strengthens the Partnership.

The role of the practice tutor is the embodiment of the strong link between schools and The Open University. Practice tutors are drawn from lead partner schools where high-quality mentoring has been identified. The practice tutors ensure that the student teacher experience meets the expectations of the Partnership across all the schools they work with. Joint

observations and the professional dialogue that accompanies the completion of the practice learning report means that the practice tutors help ensure consistency in the assessment of student teachers (Furlong, 2019; Estyn, 2019). Through their coaching role the practice tutors foster strong mentor development and facilitate the sharing of best practice across the network of schools. Thus, illustrating a more collaborative approach as opposed to a hierarchical one to partnership working (Mauri *et al.*, 2019). Also, in their relationships with multiple schools practice tutors draw together individual feedback to provide a clearer picture of the common experience on the ground. This reinforces the opportunities for consistency and coherence between partner schools (Murphy, 2020).

Using school-based staff as ‘critical readers’ ensures that the theories and examples explored by the student teachers in the online modules reflect best practice in modern Welsh classrooms. This has further strengthened the Partnership. Involvement in this process gives some schools direct responsibility in shaping course content and also allows the practitioners carrying out these roles time to engage with the latest educational research. As a consequence, this improves knowledge and practice within schools. These activities contribute to the emergence of an effective third space for the new partnership (Bernay *et al.*, 2020; Handscomb, Gu and Varley, 2014). This is particularly true as some activities were undertaken away from the partner schools and the university. For example, the neutral location used for the weekend retreat.

One lead partner school’s teachers and pupils filmed lessons to create a bank of professional learning resources. Understanding that these resources would contribute to the PGCE was another way for schools to feel valued and included in the development of the programme. Partner schools are also invited to contribute to the submission of bids for international research projects, and to Regional Education Consortia-wide ITE handbooks. Engagement with such initiatives can be viewed as supporting the links between theory and practice in ITE. This, in turn contributes to the emergence of an effective third space for the Partnership (Bernay *et al.*, 2020; Burn *et al.*, 2020). Two school representatives commented on the structure of the PGCE. It was reported that the part-time salaried route is good quality and has created confidence in the provision in comparison to previous salaried routes offered. Some previous salaried routes had required that student teachers have full control of their own class from the first day. This was viewed by the school representative as inappropriate if effective support is to be provided for student teachers.

To summarise, stakeholders reported that this PGCE programme ensures student teachers are familiar with school processes. Student teachers are supported to move gradually from familiarisation to consolidation, and finally autonomy in their practice. They are guided well through the process by the community of practice that initially surrounds them and eventually they become part of this community (Wenger, 1998). The remote, flexible online nature of the programme is providing more people in Wales with the opportunity to study for a PGCE. In the long term this will potentially support the required diversification of the workforce (Grigg and Egan, 2020; Arday, 2021; Welsh Government, 2019b). It was also reported by a couple of school representatives that student teachers on this programme experienced less disruption due to Covid-19, when compared to other ITE models. The flexible distance delivery meant the taught elements and resultant learning continued relatively uninterrupted. Such positive experiences were not evident for all in ITE at this time (la Velle *et al.*, 2020; Mutton, 2020).

Conclusion and recommendations

Reforms to ITE are integral to the wider education reforms currently underway in Wales and will contribute to the drive for a high-quality teaching profession. Partnership working between a university and lead partner schools is critical for teacher education programme development. This paper has explored the challenges and strengths of such partnership working as experienced by The Open University Partnership in Wales PGCE programme, which launched in September 2020 to expand the routes available for people to enter the teaching profession. As an alternative to the traditional one-year PGCE the part-time or salaried route is completed using a flexible distance and blended learning approach over two years.

Third space theory is offered as a useful concept to support narrowing the gap between theory and practice in teacher education. Collaboration between the university and school is deemed to be equal and fair when the third space is occupied as well as genuinely challenging the relationship dynamic previously considered as hierarchical. However, it has been proposed that the progress of partnerships is through several stages as they move towards such equity and the creation of mutually beneficial learning opportunities, with stages five and six representing true co-construction

(Burroughs *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, it was apparent that most university and school partnership working for teacher education more broadly often still tended to be 'hierarchical' (Furlong, 2019: 583). The fact that the new ITE partnerships in Wales require 'lead partnership schools' to contribute fully, therefore represents a wider paradigm shift both within ITE and beyond (Welsh Government, 2018: 5). Partnerships co-create, co-deliver and become jointly accountable for programmes of ITE shaping the wider landscape, as the profession moves towards becoming a self-improving, high trust profession. Some of the factors believed to be required for successful partnership working include mutual trust, respect, shared responsibility, and joint planning and working as well as explicit recognition that there may be tensions in organisational priorities and a need for changes in mindset and cultures (Bernay *et al.*, 2020; Thomas *et al.*, 2020; Heinz and Fleming, 2019; Carter, 2015; Handscomb, 2014). In addressing these complex and even uncomfortable tensions, it is possible to co-create a creative third space and one of possibilities rather than barriers. For example, the need for clear communication between, and engaged leadership from both schools and universities have been examined in relation to The Open University Partnership in Wales.

This small-scale study has drawn on the views of 20 key stakeholders involved in the development and early delivery of the new PGCE. It has been possible to determine how The Open University Partnership is progressing on its journey to occupy the 'third space'. Although participants focused on the operational aspects of the Partnership as opposed to pedagogical elements, all feedback has a role in developing the work of the Partnership in the future. It was reported that schools were concerned about the time needed to become familiar with the large volume of information disseminated between the university and partner schools. Understandably there have been impacts forced upon the programme as a result of Covid-19 and schools have required additional information. This could account for some of the concerns raised by those involved. Reticence to participate in online forums by some illustrated further the challenges in ensuring all communication is effective.

Some of the emerging strengths such as the clear strategic vision and effective co-construction demonstrate a transparency to the shared responsibilities and cooperation needed (Green, Tindall-Ford and Eady, 2020; European Commission, 2015). The alignment of the new flexible PGCE to the wider education reforms, with it reflecting current policy and practice in Wales, including contributing to the Curriculum for Wales, is

positively reported by those involved. Examples, such as rotating committee chairs also form an integral process for the Partnership, along with the co-construction of course materials and the opportunity for all partners to work together at a neutral location early on during the programme's development which proved 'invaluable' for developing a consistent understanding of successful ITE in practice are all significant. However, the importance of being able to develop and build even stronger working relationships with others is particularly crucial (Heinz and Fleming, 2019). Yet in this instance limitations, possibly due to the impact of Covid-19, or the online nature of the programme's delivery model, are creating challenges for some schools. These are hindering their early progress in building more robust working relationships with other schools and the university. Clarity regarding the understanding of the different roles involved in a partnership is also significant (Bernay, *et al.*, 2020). School representatives commented that the practice tutor role provides strong evidence of the effective link between schools and university. Consistency was also reported to be important as practice tutors work across several schools.

The above discussion begins to provide early evidence of The Open University Partnership in Wales PGCE programme working towards occupying the third space. An equal and fair collaborative model of working is beginning to emerge. This has been demonstrated by the shared decision making that is informing a clarity for the roles and responsibilities. The approach to chairing and membership of sub-committees and co-construction of the programme materials and delivery also begin to provide evidence of the emergence of an equal collaborative way of working. However, it can take several years for deep trust to develop and for all aspects of programmes to be truly co-constructed (Burroughs *et al.*, 2020). Thus reflecting an occupancy of a true 'third space' that will be of benefit to all (Burn *et al.*, 2020: 2). The following recommendations have emerged during this look at the early stages of the PGCE programme's delivery. They could be considered to provide the focus for actions that may have potential to encourage further advances for the programme towards substantially occupying 'the third space'. The findings also offer important learning for others to consider in ensuring critical success factors are addressed as school and university partnership working is developed.

As with all school processes, evaluation forms an integral part of identifying what has been successful, where the challenges have been and how

to move forward to make the PGCE programme even better and at the same time ensure it is a true partnership.

- To undertake a consultative review of the PGCE programme and processes to support future improvements and progress, including developing a streamlined communication plan.
- To further develop online resources for access to and dissemination of research across the Partnership, including developing the use of the forums as a space for scholarly discourse.
- To co-construct structures to facilitate opportunities for informal networking and more formal cross-school working between mentors, school coordinators and practice tutors.

There has been a close working relationship between partner schools and The Open University in Wales to develop the new PGCE programme, evaluate progress, contribute to meetings and retreats, lead agenda items in partnership meetings and participate in and lead sub-committees. The PGCE programme's ethos has been one of collaboration and responsiveness to student and school needs. Despite the challenges presented by launching a new programme during the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been an overwhelmingly positive experience for those involved and can now move forward to make the programme even more accessible and impactful.

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