Mentoring Matters: Past, Present and Future Perspectives on mentoring in Initial Teacher Education in Wales

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring is a core element of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). It shapes the professional identity, confidence, and classroom readiness of beginning teachers. In Wales and elsewhere, there are longstanding concerns about mentoring quality. Viewed through the frame of a 'usable past', this paper examines why mentoring is challenging and what can be learned from the past. The study draws on documentary analysis of inspection reports and policy documents. The analysis reveals that while relationships between higher education institutions and schools have been generally positive over time, they have not been sufficient to ensure sustained effective mentoring quality across ITE partnerships. Instead, national, regional, school, and individual factors have often converged to hinder progress and contribute to uneven experiences for student teachers. The paper identifies enduring themes and concludes with recommendations to improve the professional status, equity and coherence of mentoring in Wales. It highlights the need for a coordinated national approach to align policy, partnerships, and school conditions to strengthen mentoring across the sector.

Keywords: mentoring, initial teacher education, inspection, estyn, usable past

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Introduction

Since its ancient origins, mentoring has been understood as a relationship in which a more experienced practitioner supports the development of a less experienced colleague (Eby et al., 2007). The Welsh Government (2014) defines mentoring as a structured and sustained process that supports professional learning across key career transitions, including entry into teaching. In Wales, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) partnerships typically conceptualise mentoring as a dialogic and reflective process (Griffiths et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2021; Grigg et al., 2024). This is exemplified through approaches such as collaborative reflection (Estyn, 2025a) and educative mentoring, which emphasises co-inquiry and the collaborative construction of knowledge (Langdon and Ward, 2014; Estyn, 2025b).

Effective mentoring is widely recognised as central to student teachers' development, shaping identity, confidence, and classroom readiness (Menter et al., 2010). As one student teacher observed, mentors can 'make or break' their experience (House of Commons Education Committee, 2012: 81). Mentoring also brings benefits to mentors, including developing leadership skills, deepening professional knowledge, and encouraging reflection on their own practice (Schatz Oppenheimer and Goldenberg, 2024). At a broader level, mentoring supports schools as learning organisations and has important system-wide implications, including for teacher retention (OECD, 2025; Welsh Parliament, Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2026).

Against this backdrop, mentoring has become an increasingly important feature of ITE reform in Wales over the past decade underpinning a 'new partnerships' model that envisages universities and schools working more closely together than previously (Tabberer, 2013; Furlong, 2020). Revised ITE accreditation criteria places significantly greater weight on mentoring than earlier requirements (Welsh Government, 2017; Welsh Government, 2023). Partnerships are expected to ensure careful mentor selection, training and development, with lead schools undertaking monitoring responsibilities to ensure that student teachers are provided with regular feedback, and opportunities for observation and collaborative planning. Mentors are also expected to be afforded sufficient time and space to carry out their role. Underlying this is the assumption that strengthening mentoring practices will improve the quality and consistency of student teachers' learning experiences and well-being.

Despite well-intentioned ITE reforms designed to bring universities and schools into closer partnership, variability in mentoring quality, role ambiguity, and uneven experiences for student teachers persist (Estyn, 2018; 2026). These challenges are not new; their persistence suggests that current reforms have yet to address the underlying conditions shaping mentoring practice. This, in turn, points to the need to look beyond present policy and consider how such issues have developed over time.

Accordingly, this paper draws on Brooks's (1918) concept of a 'usable past', which treats history as a selective resource for interpreting present concerns. Subsequent scholarship recognises the danger of using the past to justify current political or cultural positions rather than being studied on its own terms (Hansot and Tyack, 1982; McCulloch, 2011; Beckett and Nuttall, 2017). Understanding the context of the time, questioning assumptions and comparing sources is key to mitigating the danger of presentism.

Methodology

This study adopts an interpretive approach, using historical analysis to examine change and continuity in mentoring within ITE in Wales. The analysis treats historical sources as a means of interpreting contemporary issues, focusing on recurring themes, patterns, and tensions rather than reconstructing an objective account of past practice. To minimise risks of anachronism, idealisation, and superficial comparison, sources are analysed in relation to their original policy and historical contexts (Gardner, 1993).

The study is based primarily on documentary analysis of inspection reports and other official publications produced by the Welsh inspectorate and government. These sources were selected because they provide authoritative, system-level perspectives on policy and practice over time, enabling longitudinal analysis of developments in mentoring. Documents were identified through an initial scoping of available material and selected based on their relevance to mentoring in ITE, their significance within policy and inspection cycles, and their credibility as public, evidence-informed accounts (Bloor and Wood, 2006).

Other forms of evidence were reviewed but not included where they did not offer comparable longitudinal or system-wide insight. For example, individual

school case studies and partnership records such as handbooks were excluded where their focus was localised or episodic. Similarly, international literature not related to the Welsh policy context was not prioritised. These decisions reflect the study's focus on tracing national system-level patterns and continuities over time, rather than capturing variation at the level of individual settings or reporting global messages.

Documents were analysed using an iterative thematic approach. This combined deductive coding informed by the study's conceptual focus on mentoring practices, organisational conditions, and policy frameworks, with inductive identification of recurring themes across sources. Analysis involved repeated close reading, comparison across time periods, and the development of thematic categories to capture both continuity and change. Attention was given to how mentoring was described, evaluated, and positioned within wider policy narratives.

Documentary analysis requires attention to authorship, audience, and production context (McCulloch and Richardson, 2000). Inspection reports reflect evolving conventions of evidence and language. For instance, terms such as 'most mentors…' correspond in more recent guidance (Estyn, 2025d) to defined quantitative thresholds (i.e. 90 per cent) but were used more loosely in earlier periods. Direct comparison is therefore approached with caution. Rather than treating findings as equivalent across time, the analysis focuses on identifying broader patterns, shifts, and underlying continuities.

Inspection reports and policy documents have also been subject to critique, particularly in relation to methodology, framing, and the representation of practice (Evans, 2023; Bradbury et al., 2024). While such limitations are acknowledged, such sources remain influential within the Welsh education system while the inspectorate is generally respected for its independence (Donaldson, 2018; Keane, 2022). As forms of 'grey literature', these documents provide insight into policy priorities, dominant discourses, and system-level evaluations over time, while also reflecting the assumptions and constraints under which they were produced. To address these limitations, sources are read critically as constructed texts rather than neutral accounts. Evidence is considered in relation to its purpose, audience, and underlying assumptions, and is triangulated with wider policy and archival materials to support interpretation. This approach enables patterns identified in inspection evidence to be compared with broader policy developments and historical context.

The study also adopts a bricolage approach (Robb, 2020), integrating documentary analysis, historical interpretation, and practitioner insight. Within this framework, the researcher's professional experience forms an additional interpretive resource, drawing on extensive involvement in teacher education and inspection in Wales to provide contextual understanding of policy and practice. This positionality is recognised as both a strength and a potential source of bias. Familiarity with policy frameworks and professional investment in mentoring may shape how evidence is interpreted and weighted. To address this, the analysis is explicitly reflexive. Interpretations are grounded in documentary and archival evidence, with professional experience used to inform questioning and deepen analysis rather than to determine conclusions. Analytical distance is maintained through comparison across sources and sustained attention to how prior assumptions may influence interpretation. In this way, positionality is acknowledged and managed as part of the research process, contributing to the credibility and trustworthiness of the study.

Historical Overview

ITE in Wales has a limited historiography (Grigg and Egan, 2021). It tends to draw on outdated accounts, subsumed within England (e.g. Dent, 1977), or narrow institutional histories (Evans, 1992; Grigg, 1998; Ellis, 2014). While there is no shortage of source material for a study of ITE (Crook, 2012), the story of how teachers were trained and educated in Wales needs its own overarching synthesis. This paper's focus addresses a specific gap in our knowledge of how ITE mentoring practices evolved.

Although the term 'mentoring' became common in the 1990s, practices like modelling, observing, and giving students feedback date back to the 1840s and 1850s, when the first teacher training colleges in Wales opened in Carmarthen, Caernarfon, and Bangor. Their practising or 'model' schools afforded students opportunities to observe, teach and critique under the guidance of college-based Masters (and later Mistresses) of Method. These mentor-cum-instructor figures exercised considerable influence, including contributing to the advance of education as a discipline in cases such as Henry Holman and Foster Watson at Aberystwyth University (Thomas et al., 2020). The 'Crit' lessons had limitations, including a

failure to expose students to a wide range of teaching contexts and styles (Robinson, 2004). Nonetheless, they were a clear attempt to link theory and practice, while also fostering reflective thinking – key aspects of modern-day mentoring.

The origins of school mentoring can be traced to the 1846 pupil-teacher scheme where headteachers of elementary schools were paid to instruct children aged 13–18 years in basic skills and classroom management (Robinson, 2004). They provided daily personal tuition before or after school to prepare pupil teachers for an annual examination conducted by inspectors. The best candidates were then awarded scholarships to complete a two-year course at a teacher training college although those who did not attend could be employed as assistant teachers. From the 1870s, centres were established to improve pupil-teachers' academic preparation for college and to provide a better balance between theory and practice. Pupil teachers dividing their time between classroom teaching in school and formal study at the centres, led by the most capable headteachers. By 1900, around half of the pupil-teacher population attended these centres and the scheme promoted opportunities for advancement, especially for girls (Board of Education, 1907).

However, there was no standardised approach to these on-the-job apprenticeships which meant inconsistencies in training were inevitable (Robinson, 2006). Autobiographies suggest that pupil-teachers' learning experiences were heavily dependent upon individual teacher styles and personalities. Some teachers provided important emotional and practical support, taking their nurturing role seriously, whereas others exploited their young charges (Jones, 1943; Llewelyn, 1943). This variability can be understood as an early manifestation of a recurring structural feature of mentoring: its dependence on individual capacity in the absence of shared frameworks or professional standards.

During the mid-twentieth century, despite growing policy calls for greater school involvement in teacher training (Crowther, 1959; Newsom, 1963; Gittins, 1967), mentoring remained the responsibility of training colleges. Tutors' reports focused on students' lesson preparation, language model, and 'teaching power', which described their instructional and classroom management skills. These reports were direct in style and articulated enduring pedagogical concerns: such as promoting pupils' thinking, avoiding excessive teacher talk, and the need for clear modelling (Evans, 1992). From the perspective of a 'usable past', these records reveal striking

continuities with present debates, suggesting that current challenges in mentoring are not simply products of recent reform but are rooted in longstanding tensions about responsibility, practice, and pedagogical purpose.

The creation of new training routes for secondary teachers at day training colleges under the auspices of the federal University of Wales (established in 1893) ended the monopoly of the older residential colleges and stimulated innovations in 'teaching practice'. For example, in the 1890s Aberystwyth students followed a 'Dual System' whereby pairs took shared responsibility for teaching the same class. While one taught, the other recorded observations and criticisms before switching roles, with students expected to reflect systematically on these notes (Evans, 1992). From an interpretive perspective, this model was an early form of structured peer mentoring, which valued feedback, reciprocity and reflective dialogue. Similarly, the use of school-based 'demonstration lessons', in which students observed expert teachers model techniques (Robinson, 2006), has resonance with later instructional forms of mentoring.

The expansion of secondary education following the Welsh Intermediate Education Act (1898) created new pathways into teaching. From 1907, local education authorities supported prospective teachers through bursaries, combining continued schooling with periods of practical experience in elementary schools. However, accounts from student teachers point to a familiar theme of considerable variation in practice (Jones, 1924). Whereas some students undertook extensive teaching duties, others were engaged in administrative tasks. Such variability points to the absence of a coherent placement guidance, with support dependent on local conditions rather than shared expectations. In this respect, inconsistency in the quality and nature of mentoring emerges early as a structural feature of ITE rather than an anomaly.

During the interwar years, official discourse reflected a gradual shift in responsibility for 'supervising' student teachers during placement. The Board of Education (1925: 83) asserted that the training of student teachers was a collective responsibility of school staff and later endorsed the appointment of individuals to oversee and support novice teachers (Board of Education, 1931). While this was suggestive of a move towards school-based mentoring, the lack of explicit guidance on roles, practices or standards meant that mentoring remained weakly conceptualised and unevenly enacted. This reflects a broader and enduring tension between policy aspiration and practice, suggesting that ambiguity in the mentor

role is not simply a historical accident but a persistent structural condition. The declining influence of college-based 'masters and mistresses of method' further accentuated this ambiguity, leaving a gap between policy aspiration and practice.

The practical challenges of organising school placements further shaped mentoring provision. At Aberystwyth, Chapple (1933) identified the coordination and supervision of placements as a persistent difficulty, exacerbated by geographical dispersion. Students placed at distance were often 'cut off' from college-based support, while tutors faced significant travel demands. These structural constraints limited opportunities for sustained high-quality mentoring interactions and reinforced variability in students' experiences. Similar issues persisted decades later (DES, 1972) and were a factor in the demise of ITE provision in Aberystwyth (Estyn, 2023b), suggesting a recurring structural tension between the policy ideal of high-quality consistent mentoring and the realities of delivery. Across this historical trajectory, mentoring appears not as a fully articulated system, but as a contingent practice – emerging in different forms, unevenly realised, and shaped by enduring organisational and contextual constraints.

In this historical context, calls for greater structure and recognition of school-based supervision began to emerge more explicitly in policy. The value of assigning a dedicated teacher to supervise student teachers resurfaced in the publication of the McNair Report (Board of Education, 1944). The Report acknowledged that for teachers, school practice was 'too brief, confused in objective and somewhat artificial' and amounted to 'an extra task thrown upon them' with no 'special recognition' (Board of Education, 1944, 77). To address this, the McNair Committee envisaged student teachers undertaking two kinds of school practice: practical training in schools spanning 12 weeks at different times in a three-year course, where they could see evidence of how college-based theories were enacted with opportunities for observations and minor investigations; and blocks of continuous and sustained teaching practice lasting a term in a three-year course, so that students could experience what it was like to be a member of staff. In the case of the latter, the McNair Committee recommended that outstanding practitioners were renumerated for taking on the supervisory responsibility which should be regarded as 'a definite, and not a merely incidental and casual, share in training their successors' (Board of Education, 1944, 81).

The McNair Committee was determined to bring schools and training institutions closer together and anticipated that its plans would 'remove some of

the suspicion of 'college methods' which undoubtedly exists in some of the schools' (Board of Education, 1944: 80). However, postwar economic constraints and other priorities meant that the vision was not realised. Instead, the assessment of students' school experiences continued to be left in the hands of visiting college tutors. Their styles varied considerably. At Bangor Normal College in the 1950s, some students recalled being left to 'sink or swim' (Ellis, 2014), while others remembered supportive, empathetic tutors. Once again, the quality of mentoring was left to individuals rather than stemming from any institutional expectations or national policy. Even when placement guidance became available at college or university level, the McNair vision was never realised. At Carmarthen, Trinity College's *Guide to Teaching Practice* (Trinity College, 1966) instructed students to have their Teaching Practice Notebook available for the tutor's inspection. There is no mention of teachers taking on any supervisory role other than administrative matters such as helping to arrange the student's timetable.

More generally, in the mid-1960s there was a growing sense that colleges and universities could do more to engage schools in their training programmes building on amicable relationships (Gittins Report, 1967). A Select Committee (1970) on teacher training recommended measures such as short secondments for teachers, joint working parties, joint interviews of course applicants, and in-service training courses. Teachers in Cardiff certainly valued such opportunities, and the creation of local teachers' centres in the 1960s and 1970s proved an important boon for their professional development (Gough, 1997). The James Report (DES, 1972) argued that training colleges were asked to do too much in one-year postgraduate courses, and it was better to have a network of professional learning centres to provide the depth of study that qualified teachers needed. It also singled out arrangements for teaching practice as a source of 'severe strain, and in some areas, approach breakdown. Many teachers in schools remain in ignorance of the purpose of teaching practice and, even more important, of the contribution to it expected of them.' (DES, 1972, 20). This uncertainty over roles and responsibilities, within broader governance arrangements, surfaced repeatedly as a concern in ITE.

The first explicit reference to the mentor's role in official literature seems to be a survey conducted by HMI of newly qualified teachers (HMI, 1982). The inspectors commended arrangements in secondary schools where a senior colleague acted as a 'mentor' to whom probationary teachers 'could turn for advice, help and sometimes friendship.' (HMI, 1982, 69). While these mentors

provided an important source of support, HMI added that 'much depended upon the mentor's perception of his role and upon the new teacher's needs, personality and perceptiveness'. Broader ideological differences played their part in how mentors saw themselves and what constituted effective teacher preparation. The Conservative government's White Paper on *Teaching Quality* (DES, 1983) paved the way for stricter accreditation of teacher training programmes (Circulars 3/84 and 21/84, Circular 59/89). Under the new Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, minimum periods of time trainee teachers spent in school were stipulated (DES, 1984; Welsh Office, 1984; Welsh Office, 1989).

During the 1990s, there was a discernible shift in both the rhetoric and role of schools in the preparation of teachers. Kenneth Clark, Secretary of State for Education, saw 'the concept of the mentor teacher as an attractive one' (Clark, 1992: 12) and reflected a shift away from the narrow concept of 'teaching practice', where students applied in school what they learned in college. HEIs were duly required to enter formal partnerships with schools, initially for the training of secondary teachers (Welsh Office, 1992). This was strengthened through the 1994 Education Act, which empowered schools to provide courses of initial training for schoolteachers, and subsequent regulations (Welsh Office, 1998). In practice, many schools were unwilling to assume greater training responsibilities, including extended mentoring (Grigg, 1998).

One consequence of this trend was the appearance of useful publications designed to support mentors in their new roles and to stimulate debate over models of mentoring (Hagger et al., 1993; Fish, 1995; Tomlinson, 1995). Such material was needed given ongoing concerns expressed by HMI over the variability in school commitment to ITE (DES, 1991), and questions over whether all teachers could mentor effectively, dubbed the 'fantasy of expertise' (Smith and Alred, 1993: 103). The early partnerships in Wales faced financial and practical challenges, including quality assurance of mentoring (OHMCI, 1996), that continue to have resonance today. Despite these reforms, the uneven mentoring capacity across schools and limited resourcing continued to mediate implementation, reinforcing patterns evident in earlier decades.

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of fundamental ideological differences over what was expected of initial 'training' or 'education' (the choice of word itself reflected these differences). Official support leaned towards the promotion of craft

knowledge acquired in the classroom with trainees coached against prescribed criteria within competency-based frameworks (Furlong and Maynard, 1995). Most teacher educators in HEIs favoured the nurturing of reflective, enquiring practitioners (Guyton and McIntyre, 1990; Beauchamp et al., 2015). These differences shaped policy developments in Wales.

Following devolution in 1999, the newly created National Assembly for Wales (2001: 46) announced its intent to 'look again at the form and content of ITE' so that it provided a sure foundation for teachers and met government priorities. The Welsh Government did not pursue diversified school-led ITE programmes underpinned by marketisation and neoliberal values popular in Westminster. However, persistent concerns about the sector led to three reviews between 2005 and 2015 which brought significant structural changes to ITE (Mutton and Breeze, 2025).

First, the Furlong Review made thirty-six wide-ranging recommendations to improve and rationalise ITE in Wales, most of which were accepted by the Welsh Government (Furlong et al., 2006). Of relevance to this paper was the proposed strengthening of the school-based component in programmes. Despite broad support for closer partnerships with schools, HEIs complained of carrying most responsibility without being able to influence school quality (Menter et al., 2006). The inspectorate had already identified the need for greater ITE funding and stronger quality assurance processes (OHMCI, 1998) to improve 'quality, consistency and parity' of student experience during school placements (Bassett, 2003: 4). This was despite the gradual introduction of memoranda of agreements, partnership guidance, and quality assurance procedures designed to check school compliance and adherence to mentoring roles and responsibilities.

The creation of three regional ITE Centres put considerable strain on ITE leaders within institutions. From personal experience, as director of the South West Wales Centre (2011–13), considerable time and energy was invested in seeking to align processes between merged institutions. Differences in institutional culture, language, governance, and resource management, alongside job insecurity and divergent quality assurance systems, inhibited the creation of a shared vision for mentoring. Across Wales, inspection reports on all centres identified weaknesses in mentoring, such as overly generous feedback to students (Estyn 2012; 2013; 2016; 2017). Reflecting on this period, an Estyn inspector later suggested that some programme leaders had 'taken their eye off the ball' in

developing mentoring, hindered by uncertainty and a reluctance to collaborate. While strong practice existed, it was by exception rather than the norm.[1]

A second review led by Tabberer (2013) focused on improving the quality and consistency in ITE but made limited reference to mentoring, beyond noting scope for greater commonality across centres. It did, however, highlight key contextual factors, particularly the need for stronger leadership to drive change. Tabberer argued that progress had been too slow to consolidate effective practice and secure consistently high standards. It was hindered by a lack of collaboration between external bodies involved in ITE. In response, the Welsh Government appointed Professor John Furlong as adviser to the sector.

Furlong authored a third review, *Teaching Tomorrow's Teachers* (Furlong, 2015), which had significant implications for ITE in Wales. Most notably here, Furlong recommended introducing a more robust set of ITE accreditation standards, including minimum standards for partnerships with schools (Furlong, 2015; 2020). The revised standards that followed are based on a model where lead schools 'contribute fully to the joint leadership, accountability, and delivery of the programmes' (Welsh Government, 2017: 19).

Discussion

This historical overview shows that successive reforms, from the McNair Report (1944), through partnership developments in the 1990s, to recent accreditation requirements (Welsh Government, 2017; 2023), have consistently recognised the importance of mentoring. However, they have not secured the conditions required to improve the coherence, equity, and professional status of mentoring in Wales. As a result, reforms have tended to strengthen expectations of ITE providers without resolving the underlying constraints that shape practice.

These recurring limitations can be understood as arising from interrelated issues at individual, partnership, and system levels. At the individual level, mentoring remains highly dependent on personal expertise and local conditions. The relational nature of mentoring means that personality, social skills, and emotional intelligence

1 Interview conducted 8 September 2025. Permissions and university ethical approval granted. Swansea University Ethics Committee Approval 14528.

are key factors in affording student teachers with the level of support and challenge they need. Robinson (2006) noted that the old pupil-teacher system was essentially built on a moral relationship between teacher and apprentice. This moral dimension remains key to understanding contemporary models of teacher education, where professional identity, ethical responsibility, and relational trust continue to underpin effective mentoring and the development of new teachers. In the most effective schools, mentoring has a high status and there is a clear commitment to supporting mentors' own development (Estyn, 2018). However, this does not always transfer to the mentoring of student teachers. Mentors are typically expected to balance support with assessment, sometimes resulting in 'judgementoring', where evaluative pressures constrain reflective dialogue (Hobson and Malderez, 2013).

At the partnership level, differences in capacity, priorities, and accountability between schools and universities, combined with difficulties in enacting joint accountability, lead to inconsistent experiences for student teachers (Menter et al., 2006; Estyn, 2024; 2025a; 2025b; 2025c). All seven partnerships inspected between 2021 and 2025 received a recommendation to improve the quality and consistency of mentoring. While ITE provision meets the civic missions of universities, it is not a financially sustainable model particularly in the case of smaller programmes. Investment in ITE has varied accordingly as senior leaders prioritise finite resources, particularly when faced with major budget deficits. This has impacted investment in mentor development and other partnership activities.

The matter of ITE leadership is also relevant. Attracting and retaining suitably qualified and experienced ITE leaders to drive forward mentoring and other reforms is challenging. Based on first-hand knowledge and experience of the sector, there is a notable shortage of long-established ITE leadership experience within current ITE provision. Whereas school leaders have benefited from national training programmes, such investment has not been set aside for teacher educators. Estyn (2026: 8) report that leadership in the sector is 'fragile and precarious' with little support for ITE Directors.

At the system level, there has also been a lack of sustained investment in mentoring as a priority in strengthening the teaching workforce. More generally, austerity pressures, competing policy agendas, and the short-term tenure of education ministers (even when sharing the same political allegiance), hinder continuity in policy. Reconfigurations and institutional mergers have not provided the sector with necessary stability. Overlapping Education Workforce Council (EWC)

and Estyn accountability arrangements create competing pressures around compliance and improvement.

In practice, universities have struggled to achieve joint accountability with partner schools (Estyn, 2026). It is rather like a cycling peloton of tandem riders where one is pedalling hard, steering the bike, and carrying the heavier load (financially) and the other is not pedalling with the same force. The cyclists may move forward but there is a risk of wobbling, slowing down and tipping over because the effort is not balanced, and the responsibility is not truly shared. Even when schools are committed to ITE, many lack the time, stability, or staffing capacity to fully engage as co-owners of programme quality. Despite memorandums of agreement, for example, releasing mentors for training or investing time in mentor research is not considered a priority in some partner schools. The difficulties in realising joint accountability are mirrored in uneven mentoring provision, where expectations of shared responsibility are not always matched by capacity. Moreover, it is often overlooked that for their part, university-based mentors have very little say in how schools plan, implement and evaluate the curriculum for Wales leaving student teachers exposed to potential misconceptions.

Mentoring will only move forward if there is a shared direction of travel and destination, or what the accreditation requirements call a clear 'line of sight' between the HEI and school leadership's responsibilities (Welsh Government, 2023: 14). More than this, achieving symbiotic relationships between universities and school partners is dependent upon a shared commitment to mentoring, supported through appropriate resourcing.

Concluding recommendations

Mentoring is complex and subject to wide-ranging influences. The historical analysis presented in this paper highlights enduring challenges in mentoring within ITE in Wales. These challenges – particularly variability in quality, role ambiguity, and uneven resourcing – have persisted across successive periods of reform. Drawing on this 'usable past', the following recommendations seek to address these longstanding issues by identifying practical steps to strengthen the coherence, equity, and professional status of mentoring across the system.

Recommendation 1: Raise the profile of mentoring as a professional practice

Historically, the importance of mentoring has not been matched by its status or recognition within the system. As early as the McNair Report (1944), supervising student teachers was described as an 'extra task' with no 'special recognition', a pattern that has persisted across subsequent reforms. Mentoring has too often remained a peripheral activity rather than a clearly defined professional role.

Mentoring should therefore be repositioned as a high-status professional practice within a national approach that emphasises its developmental and dialogic nature. This should be supported through opportunities for formal accreditation, national recognition, and clear career pathways, elevating mentoring from an implicit expectation to a recognised area of expertise. While recent initiatives and strategy signal renewed intent (Welsh Government, 2019; 2026), the historical record suggests that sustained investment and system-level prioritisation are essential if mentoring is to achieve the professional status long advocated but seldom realised.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen the consistency and quality of mentoring through improved mentor selection, training and scaling up effective practices

Variability in mentoring quality is a persistent historical feature of ITE in Wales and elsewhere. Early pupil-teacher apprenticeships lacked standardisation, resulting in experiences heavily dependent on individual teachers' capacity and disposition. Similar patterns were evident in early twentieth-century placements, where student experiences varied widely due to inconsistent supervision and local conditions. Across these periods, the absence of shared frameworks and professional expectations led to uneven provision. This pattern continues in contemporary ITE, indicating that mentoring requires deliberate selection, structured training, and ongoing development. Partnerships should therefore strengthen systems for identifying and preparing mentors, recognising that effective mentoring depends on specific skills and dispositions rather than being an inherent capability of all teachers.

The development of regional hubs or professional learning centres offers a historically grounded solution. Earlier models – such as pupil-teacher centres and the professional learning centres proposed in the James Report (DES, 1972) – were

designed to provide coherence, shared expertise, and a stronger link between theory and practice. Reconceptualising these approaches, for example through modern training schools (Furlong, 2015) or regional hubs, could reduce variability, provide consistent training and support, and embed quality assurance mechanisms across partnerships.

Mentors need access to the most effective, research-informed mentoring practices to ensure that they are providing student teachers with quality support and guidance. Partnerships should harness the powers of Generative Artificial Intelligence to support mentors in specific skills, such as target setting. Hwb, the Welsh Government's official digital platform, should host a curated suite of mentoring resources, including filmed examples of mentoring practices, infographics, and research evidence, to strengthen understanding of what 'high-quality mentoring' means and looks like in practice.

Recommendation 3: Review the value for money mentoring currently affords

Constraints of time, workload, and resources have consistently limited mentoring quality across different historical periods. For example, early attempts to organise school placements highlighted logistical challenges, including geographical dispersion and limited access to sustained support (Chapple, 1933). Similarly, mid-twentieth-century arrangements often left mentoring responsibilities unevenly distributed and inadequately supported. Despite current policy expectations that mentors should receive protected time, appropriate resourcing, and access to professional learning (Welsh Government, 2023), these conditions remain inconsistently applied. Historical patterns suggest that such expectations will continue to be only partially realised without stronger mechanisms to ensure implementation.

There is therefore a need to review how funding for mentoring is allocated and used at school level. In some cases, schools are in partnership with several providers and their income for ITE responsibilities, especially as Lead schools, is significant. While financial support for mentoring exists within partnership arrangements, its impact is unclear, particularly where mentor engagement in training remains so variable. A clearer alignment between funding, expectations, and accountability is required to ensure that resources translate into improved mentoring practice rather than nominal compliance.

Recommendation 4: Align accountability and strengthen system coherence

Fragmented accountability and role ambiguity have long undermined mentoring quality. Historical evidence shows that even where responsibility for student teachers was described as shared – particularly since the interwar period – roles, expectations, and standards have not been defined clearly (e.g. DES, 1972). This has led to uneven enactment in practice. Contemporary arrangements continue to reflect tensions over roles and responsibilities. Greater alignment between Estyn, the Education Workforce Council, and Welsh Government expectations is therefore essential. As Estyn and the EWC plan important changes, such as forthcoming ITE inspection framework and accreditation updates, there is an opportunity to clarify roles, streamline accountability, and align expectations to reduce duplication and improve coherence. Without this, fragmentation is likely to persist and limit reform.

Recommendation 5: Reduce variability through strategic, system-level investment

Unequal access to high-quality mentoring has been a consistent feature of teacher education in Wales. From early apprenticeship models through to late twentieth-century partnerships, student teachers' experiences have been shaped more by local capacity, resources, and school commitment than by national entitlement or expectations. This historical continuity highlights that variability is not incidental but structurally embedded. Addressing it requires sustained system-level investment rather than isolated initiatives. Targeted partnership support should be directed to schools with lower capacity to ensure a more equitable distribution of mentoring expertise.

Embedding mentoring within a long-term national workforce strategy would help secure consistency and sustainability. In doing so, high-quality mentoring becomes a system-wide expectation rather than a variable feature of local provision, reducing the longstanding 'postcode lottery' evident across historical and contemporary contexts.

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