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Using a blended distance pedagogy in teacher education to address challenges in teacher recruitment

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ABSTRACT

Recruiting high-quality teachers is critical in supporting the delivery of an effective education experience for learners in schools. This paper examines how a new flexible two-year postgraduate teaching qualification is contributing to addressing the challenges of teacher recruitment in Wales. There is a shortage of teachers able to teach mathematics and science. It is also challenging to recruit Welsh-medium teachers, teachers from minority ethnic backgrounds and to fill vacancies in rural schools. To widen access to teacher education and diversify the teaching workforce, individuals with an appropriate undergraduate degree are offered the opportunity to train to teach via a flexible blended distance learning route, which is either part time or salaried. Early indications show that the flexibility of the programme has attracted career changers, who bring important transferable skills to their teaching practice. Although this is a relatively small-scale case study, it is apparent that offering a more flexible opportunity to those wishing to train to teach is of benefit to individuals, schools and the wider education system.

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Introduction

The recruitment and retention of a high-quality teaching workforce is a priority for all nations (Welsh Government, 2017a; UNESCO, 2016). Moves towards more school-based Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes with options for part-time and employment-based routes contribute to ensuring a regular supply of teachers, as these routes offer opportunities for people to enter the profession who may previously have believed the profession was closed to them (George & Maguire, 2019). Such options have been limited within the Welsh context, with two former small employment-based routes available via the Graduate Teacher Programme and Teach First and no part-time provision at all. Therefore, the provision discussed here is the sole distance provider in Wales. In Wales there is a shortage of mathematics and science teachers. Recruiting ethnic minority teachers and Welsh-medium teachers, who are fluent Welsh speakers and able to deliver their subject in Welsh, as well as filling vacancies in rural schools, is also challenging

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(Education Workforce Council, 2020). Currently, education reform is underway in Wales and ITE is an important element of this. Since the introduction of new statutory criteria for ITE (Welsh Government, 2018a) a range of new programmes have been offered by Welsh universities. This paper aims to examine the initial stages of the implementation of a new flexible teacher education programme and explore the extent to which there is potential for such a programme to address the challenge of teacher recruitment shortages in Wales (Welsh Government, 2019b).

Since 1969, The Open University has provided inspiration for a diverse range of learners; it began by offering access to higher education learning and qualifications delivering content using television and radio (Weinbren, 2015). Today, The Open University continues to serve a diverse range of students and has evolved its delivery as new technologies become more prevalent (Jeong, 2018). The Open University in Wales Partnership PGCE (Post-Graduate Certificate in Education) enrolled its first student teachers in 2020 on either the salaried or part-time route. The salaried route is for those already employed in a school as teaching assistants or in non-teaching roles linked to learning such as librarians and laboratory technicians. These students work full-time in the school that endorses them; the school pays their salary; and the cost of study is supported by a Welsh Government grant. These student teachers divide their time between completing their usual duties, practice learning periods in their school, and online study. The part-time option involves two to three days a week in school completing practice learning and approximately 16 hours a week engaged in online study, as student teachers combine study with work or other commitments. For these student teachers, they may draw on a part-time student loan and grant options or self-fund their study.

In comparison to a traditional one-year PGCE programme, the part-time and salaried routes are delivered over two years. The programme offers flexible blended distance learning and includes students and schools based in rural areas. At least one student teacher and partner school is based in every region across Wales. Schools involved receive financial support for the cost of mentoring, and additional financial support is available for those schools who are also a Lead Partner school. Lead Partner schools support the strategic leadership and development of the programme, and Associate schools support the part-time student teachers through school-based practice learning periods.

Improving access to the qualification aims to diversify the teaching workforce, and by targeting Welsh medium, mathematics and science, shortages in specific subject areas are also addressed. The following discussion positions the new flexible PGCE within current education reform; distance education and its application within ITE are also discussed. Data collected from the first cohort of student teachers, via programme data, survey and interviews, and feedback from stakeholders are analysed as the effectiveness of the programme to address recruitment challenges; the early impact of the programme on those who have experienced barriers to entering the teaching profession; and the potential of a flexible blended distance pedagogy for teacher education are explored.

Education reform in Wales

An expanding body of literature examines the rationale and progress of education reform in Wales (Evans, 2021; Furlong et al., 2021; Mutton & Burn, 2020; OECD, 2017, 2020). Curriculum and assessment arrangements are central to these reforms (Donaldson, 2015).

In parallel with concerns about the quality of teacher education internationally (Hardy et al., 2021; Sharpes, 2020), teacher education in Wales had reached a ‘critical turning point’, with the system reported to be in decline and not suitable for training the teachers needed (Furlong, 2015; Tabberer, 2013). Other changes underway in Wales also have consequences for ITE provision. For instance, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act underpins the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of the nation (Welsh Government, 2015); well-being is an element of the new curriculum framework and other initiatives (Welsh Government, 2021a; Welsh Government, 2020). Legislation such as the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Bill aims to provide a unified system to support all learners from 0 to 25 with additional learning needs (Welsh Government, 2020a). There is also a drive to develop professional learning communities to increase research and support coaching and mentoring in schools (Welsh Government, 2013). Initiatives such as the Pupil Development Grant and a rural education action plan also contribute to the efforts for an inclusive and equal education offer (Welsh Government, 2018b, 2020b).

The Welsh language sabbatical scheme and Welsh-medium PGCE, which support the Welsh Government’s target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2017c), also contribute to the ongoing education reforms for the teacher workforce (Welsh Government, 2019a). Such education reforms reflect practices reported to positively improve teacher education, such as aligning to professional teaching standards, integrating theory and practice by supporting work in settings and research-informed clinical practice (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Tucker, 2019). The recruitment and retention of teachers is central to the Welsh Government’s workforce development plan, which states that the new routes into teaching delivered by The Open University are ‘designed to revolutionise the way ITE is provided in Wales’ (Welsh Government, 2019b, p. 29).

Distance and blended learning

Distance learning has evolved to accommodate learners separated in ‘time and space from facilitators, learners and learning resources’ (Bozkurt, 2019, p. 497). However, the split between on-campus education and distance learning is becoming less clear with ‘online learning, e-learning and virtual learning’ blurring the issue and a more blended approach emerging (Traxler, 2018, p. 2). Distance learning offers opportunities to learners, whatever their socio-economic circumstances or location, and this underpins the new flexible routes into teaching (Saba, 2016). Growth in new technologies has resulted in fundamental changes not only to the learning activities of The Open University but also to education as a whole (Jeong, 2018). Blended learning, with its combination of distance (online) learning and face-to-face experience, is part of this evolving process (Kintu et al., 2017; Rodríguez & Rojo, 2020). However, as the teacher ‘balances the learner’s desire for autonomy by providing the organisation and structure’, understanding the teaching and learning from the point of view of the learner is key for distance learning (Saba, 2016, p. 22). Nevertheless, distance learning has evolved along with the technologies that enable it (Shearer et al., 2020), and some of the key features of successful blended learning design are suggested to include the quality of the technology, online tools and face-to-face contact, with attitude and self-regulation also influencing learners’ satisfaction (Kintu et al., 2017).

The importance of some face-to-face contact within The Open University distance delivery model is evident, as it helps to strengthen ‘human connections’ (Jeong, 2018, p. 176). However, even though continued technological progress has contributed to a paradigm shift in distance learning, the impact of the lockdowns resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic have continued to influence not only the changes in the process of distance learning further but also people’s perceptions (Radha et al., 2020). Some learners report on the positive impact of online learning and the potential of this approach to provide increased opportunities in future. However, it is important that any momentum forced on the blended learning approach by the lockdowns continues to be assessed and incorporated to improve learners’ opportunities (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Radha et al., 2020). Others report the positive effects of blended learning on educational outcomes (Şentürk, 2020). However, the potential of blended learning in teacher education is under-explored (Kim et al., 2015). An important element of this study is the ‘blend’ of distance and face-to-face learning and the extent to which it offers a more flexible route to train as a teacher.

Offering student teachers the opportunity to train via distance learning is not new. Some countries with teacher shortages train many new teachers this way. For example, in India thousands have accessed distance learning to enter teaching; it is proposed that an ‘integrated approach’ guarantees that important professional knowledge is delivered (Bose, 2013, p. 120). The Open University began offering distance learning as a route into teaching in Scotland in 1994. Increases in Scotland’s population required more teachers, with new routes into teaching needed to address shortage subjects and ensure enough teachers in rural locations (Redford, 2020). From 2000 The Open University offered a blended distance learning course for student teachers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Hutchinson, 2006), with this programme available until 2008. This is linked to the aspirations of the Welsh education reform – it is not just about more teachers, but also about improving the quality of teaching in the workforce in general and the readiness to deliver a new curriculum.

The blended distance learning pedagogy in practice – the Open University in Wales

Knowledge acquisition

Opportunities available to student teachers to work alongside and observe experienced teachers during their school placements, and online seminar discussions with their university tutors and peer group provide a safe environment to explore new knowledge and understanding and reflect the blended distance learning approach in practice during the new flexible PGCE. Student teachers progress through a ‘spiral’ curriculum; moving from ‘familiarisation’ to ‘consolidation’ and finally to ‘autonomy’, being able to return to address professional knowledge in increasing depth. Progress through each level provides opportunities to deepen understanding of theory and practice. This approach is based on the premise that ‘learning should not only take us somewhere; it should allow us later to go further easily’, and in structuring learning appropriately all concepts can be accessible to all (Bruner, 1960, p. 17). Topics are revisited in increasing complexity as knowledge and understanding deepen and previous learning is built upon (Woodward,

2019). Applying this approach to ITE can result in powerful programmes that ensure teachers are prepared successfully to teach and support a wide range of learners (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Communities of practice

Communities of practice exist in a range of formats with some working face to face, ‘core and peripheral’ members drawn from different organisations and some entirely online (Wenger & Wenger-Traynor, 2015, p. 3). In this instance, the communities of practice for the student teachers have the potential to demonstrate effective collaboration and provide a safe yet challenging environment for research and personal development (McLean Davies et al., 2013; Patton & Parker, 2017). Others note that having a flexible online mode of communication and learning can provide opportunities for successful communities of practice (Fowler et al., 2013). Student teachers also develop the professional attributes that will provide a strong foundation for their future career. Collaborative professionalism adds value to individual human capital and impact, and reflects the professional teaching and leadership standards (Welsh Government, 2017b; Hargreaves, 2019). This collaboration forms a cornerstone of the social-constructivist learning approaches, which form part of the programme’s pedagogic rationale.

Although the lockdowns accelerated online learning, the new flexible PGCE qualifications were planned before 2020. Student teachers on the part-time and salaried route experience a combination of support and material delivered by an Open University tutor alongside teachers based in schools. The university tutors are integral to the training of the new teachers, yet the school-based practitioners are equally as important, and as they are based in the schools they have regular face-to-face contact with the student teachers – thus the distance pedagogy is blended. The integration of theory and practice knowledge is supported by the use of scaffold tasks and mediated by the school mentor. These are known as ‘practice learning activities’ and are designed to support the student to test theoretical and research-based concepts through application to their practice. Additionally, students and mentors undertake jointly a cycle of lesson study – so the model is blended not only in its delivery methods but in its pedagogic structure too.

However, there were some initial challenges during the early implementation stages of the flexible PGCE. These included partner schools finding it difficult to find time to familiarise themselves with the new programme expectations and build effective relationships to deliver the programme in true partnership. Launching the programme during the pandemic provided additional pressure, particularly for school-based staff impacted by an increase in workload, yet the university responded effectively, with successful collaborative working and efficient communication key features of the early stages of the programme, as reported by school representatives during their engagement with this research.

The blended learning approach adopted by the programme fulfils students’ preference to meet instructors face-to-face and their preference for a more distance education experience that accommodates personal circumstances (Simonson et al., 2019). Due to the blended approach, it is easy for student teachers to maintain communication with university tutors throughout school practice periods, which is important to student teachers (Donlon, 2019). Students also value informal

interactions with their peers that happen during face-to-face sessions (Simonson et al., 2019). Maintaining both formal and informal interactions with and between students is also believed to be critical to support student retention (Weller et al., 2018). The new flexible PGCE encourages such informal interactions during online seminars and discussion forums. This facilitates social support that is needed to help students feel that they belong to an active peer community of learners (Tinto, 1975). Key to the whole approach is positioning the student at the centre of all learning (Saba, 2016; Shearer et al., 2020). Significant positive influences on academic achievement and long-term learning have been reported for student teachers who experience blended learning as opposed to a more traditional face-to-face delivery (Şentürk, 2020). The lockdowns highlight the importance of distance learning and the potential for the delivery of a more blended approach in future. However, developing technological literacy is also important and is beneficial for individuals' professional development and future learning (Digital Classroom Teaching Task and Finish Group, 2012; Şentürk, 2020). The new flexible PGCE provides opportunity to develop such digital competency skills that support learning for the 21st century; this is significant as it has been reported that ITE courses often lack preparation for this (Fernandez-Batanero et al., 2019).

The flexible PGCE shares many similarities with other Welsh Initial Teacher Education provision in so much as it is required to meet the same accreditation criteria. However, the way in which it achieves this is realised in a different way. These new routes are the sole distance provision currently available in Wales, and whilst there are three-year undergraduate routes available to those in the primary sector, there are only one-year PGCE options available more widely to those in the secondary sector. Interactive asynchronous online materials, aligned to the programme of live seminars, are accessed via a virtual learning platform and mean that a student can study at any time and in any place that suits them, giving them control and flexibility over their learning as they are not tied to a lecture schedule. The interactive nature of the materials and the carefully designed learning tasks combine to create an integrated and cohesive alignment of learning outcomes across different elements of the programme. Case studies based on practice in Lead schools and audio-visual examples of teaching in Welsh schools also support learner engagement as they have direct relevance to their professional context and model the research and theory-based concepts studied (van Ameijde et al., 2015).

In drawing together the literature, it is apparent that there is potential to offer more flexible routes into teaching such as part-time and employment-based programmes, and the ongoing Welsh education reform provides a dynamic landscape in which to explore the potential of these further, especially when this is combined with the capacity of distance learning to accommodate learners' circumstances. Taking this into account, the following research questions guided the research design for this study as it examined the extent to which a new flexible teacher education programme can address teacher recruitment shortages:

- (1) What are the differences between the profile of the Welsh student teacher population and those training to teach on the new flexible route, in regard to ethnicity, disability and gender?

- (2) What are the barriers into the teaching profession reported by those studying via the new flexible route into teaching?
- (3) What is the potential for the flexible route into teaching to have an impact on widening access to the teaching profession?

Method

A case study approach was adopted to investigate the extent to which the new two-year flexible teaching qualification is contributing to addressing the challenges of teacher recruitment. This offers an adaptable approach ensuring that the different elements are captured and an analysis of a particular structure is assured – in this case, the flexible PGCE programme (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Timmons & Cairns, 2010). The case is specific to the Welsh education reform context and the challenge of recruitment to the teaching profession (Harland, 2014). This is supported by others, as case studies investigate ‘a contemporary phenomenon’ (Yin, 2018, p. 45) and contribute to understanding ‘contexts, communities and individuals’ (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013, p. 3). Consequently, this results in there being a more ‘complete understanding’ (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018, p. 900).

Purposive sampling was applied to collect data from all relevant stakeholders. By employing concurrent mixed methods, quantitative data was examined from secondary data sources such as Welsh Government student population and workforce statistics and programme data that records the profile of enrolled student teachers (e.g. age, gender and ethnicity); along with a baseline survey completed by a student sample. The survey also gathered further insight regarding the profile of the students, such as the extent of their previous work experience in education and other sectors. Unfortunately this type of data is not specifically collected from all those training to teach across Wales, which limited the potential for comparisons to be made. However, due to the importance of attracting entrants to the profession with a broad range of experiences, this data is useful in this instance. The qualitative data included responses from key education stakeholders and extended answers provided by student teachers to the online survey and interview notes.

Ethical approval was given by The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 3841), with written consent received prior to conducting interviews. Stakeholders, including representatives from partner schools, The Open University and the regional education consortia (the ‘middle-tier’ of educational organisations that form part of the regional school improvement processes) all contributed their views on the development and delivery of the PGCE with written responses to a series of prompts. Student teachers’ profile data provided age, gender, ethnicity and disability information, and performance data were gathered from practice and academic assessments. Of the 48 student teachers who responded to the survey, 34 were training to teach in the primary sector and 14 in the secondary sector, with 29 on the salaried route and 19 on the part-time route. The majority of respondents were female (39 out of 48). The student teachers who contributed to interviews were balanced equally between primary and secondary and the two different programme routes. The authors are part of the PGCE programme’s operation and delivery team; the first author joined the programme after the recruitment of the first student cohort and the second author contributed to the development of the programme

Table 1. Overview of the methodology.

Data source	Number of responses /data set	Collection dates
Stakeholder feedback	20	December 2020-February 2021
Student teacher online survey	48	February-March 2021
Student teacher interviews	16	March-April 2021
Student teacher profile and performance data	138 and 126*	September 2020 and March 2021

Note: *The difference in student teacher numbers due to withdrawals from the programme.

content. It is acknowledged that reflexivity is a complex process, and throughout this study the authors sought to be transparent, with conclusions underpinned with the data and the specific source of such data included (Mortari, 2015; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022).

Table 1 is an overview of the data sources. It is noted that the generation of data took place during periods of lockdown, when other ITE programmes were also delivering using blended models. Quantitative and qualitative data are integrated, with the following interpretation based on the combined data. This approach supports a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of implementing a blended distance learning pedagogy (Check & Schutt, 2012; Creswell, 2015). By integrating the student profile and performance data and closed survey question responses with qualitative interview data and qualitative survey responses, there is potential for a more robust study to be achieved and to gather more insight of people's direct experiences (Creamer, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017).

If the study is viewed as a whole it is possible to see that although each data source can be seen to contribute to specific aspects, such as the stakeholders referring to the flexibility of the programme, by producing the findings together they provide deeper insight about the new programme as a whole. The quantitative student teacher online survey responses and student teacher profile and performance data provided the sources for comparative analysis with the wider student teacher education population dataset in Wales (secondary data source). This allows for the use of statistics during data analysis, which reduces complexity (Reale, 2014), and allows similarities and differences to be identified, with the presentation of the profiles of the different student cohorts possible. The analysis of the stakeholder feedback and qualitative responses from student teacher online survey and interview responses contributed to understanding both the potential impact of being able to access a two-year postgraduate qualification compared with the more traditional one-year route and the reported barriers to the teaching profession. By indicating which data supports which research question some integration of findings is attempted, which can contribute to stronger outcomes; triangulation of some of the findings also supports this (Bryman, 2006).

In using a thematic analysis process for some of this project, both inductive and deductive approaches were applied, supported by qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). Although there are particular stages in thematic analysis expected, flexibility means that variations in approaches exist (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For this study, initial familiarisation with the data involved revisiting the qualitative survey responses and interview notes and provided the beginning of the formulation of codes. It is difficult to avoid applying particular deductive codes, for instance, the programme is required to address barriers to the teacher profession (Education Workforce Council, 2020; Welsh Government, 2017a, 2019b). Therefore, the first coding

framework included such aspects, yet it became apparent that more latent elements were contained within the dataset, which meant introducing codes to accommodate these, e.g. existing responsibilities and confidence. This offered a flexible yet systematic approach to the process (Krippendorff, 2019). From here, overarching themes that sought to address the research questions helped to structure the analysis, which resulted in codes being drawn together. During the analysis, each participant was allocated a number with a letter/s before the number to indicate the data source. For example, for stakeholder comments 'S'; for primary student survey response 'PS'; secondary student teacher survey response 'SS' and for primary and secondary interview data 'PI' or 'SI'. This information is included in the attribution of comments and direct quotes throughout.

Discussion of findings

Demographic profile of student teachers

When compared to students enrolled in one-year PGCE programmes in Wales, the age profile of the student teachers undertaking the flexible PGCE is different. Figure 1 shows that student teachers studying the flexible PGCE are predominantly older than those studying via the one-year PGCE at other ITE providers in Wales. Almost 30% of those training to teach the primary phase are in the 40–59 age bracket, whereas 10% of those training to teach secondary on the new programme are in this age bracket. This could indicate a greater latent demand for this type of programme within primary settings.

During the following discussion, the data for those training with other ITE providers in Wales include student teachers training on one-year PGCE programmes, but in some instances the data also refer to undergraduate routes into teaching. If gender is considered, more than double the number of females are training to teach in Wales than males, with the majority of males training for the secondary sector and the majority of females following primary sector training programmes (Welsh Government, 2022). The new flexible PGCE gender data are very similar to the wider picture across Wales. Recruiting

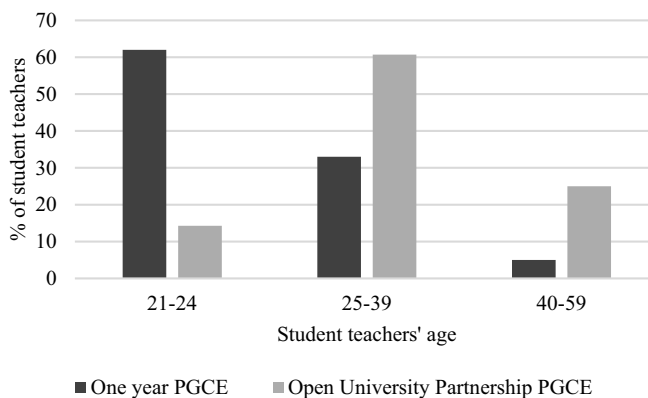


Figure 1. A comparison of the age of student teachers on one-year programmes in Wales and those on the new two-year PGCE (Source: StatsWales, 2022b and programme data; one-year PGCE $n=1255$; Open University Partnership PGCE $n=138$).

Table 2. The proportion of student teachers in Wales reporting disability, ethnic minority background and training to teach through the medium of Welsh.

ITE route	% of student teachers reporting ...		
	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds	a known disability	training to teach through the medium of Welsh
All ITE in Wales	4.7	14	27
One-year PGCE in Wales	4.8	15	20.7
The Open University Partnership PGCE (two years)	5.1	7	19.7

Welsh-medium teachers, teachers from minority ethnic backgrounds and those willing to teach in rural schools is challenging (Education Workforce Council, 2020). Table 2 presents the profile of student teachers in regard to this.

(Source: StatsWales, 2022a; 2022d; Welsh Government, 2022 and programme data).

According to the 2011 census data, 4% of the Welsh population are from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (Welsh Government, 2021b, p. 19). However, if more recent data are sourced the figure is 4.9% (StatsWales, 2022c); when the 2021 census data are available this will provide more up-to-date information. The Welsh Government has announced financial incentives for candidates to support this recruitment (Welsh Government, 2021b; 2020c), and The Open University is engaged in ongoing activity with the Education Workforce Council and other ITE partnerships in Wales to improve the teaching of themes and experiences relating to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities and recruitment (Williams, 2021).

The proportion of student teachers on all ITE programmes in Wales who report a known disability is 14%; of these 46% report a specific learning disability (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 24). If only those studying via the one-year PGCE in Wales are considered, the data are similar: 15% reported a known disability, and for 47% of these, this is a specific learning disability, whereas 7% of those on the new flexible Open University Partnership PGCE report a known disability. Proportionately, slightly more student teachers with disabilities study the part-time route (10%) as opposed to the salaried route (6%). However, 15% of survey respondents reported a disability. One possible explanation for this difference could be that some student teachers elect not to declare a disability at registration. It has been considered that individuals may elect to not disclose a disability to avoid any stigma that they may perceive is associated with this (Kendall & Tarman, 2016). It is possible that the PGCE students believe that others could think that declaring a disability would have a negative impact on their 'fitness to practice', whereas the survey was anonymous. Nevertheless, the benefits for those with disabilities studying the part-time route were reported by a couple of survey respondents (PS53 and SS56), as they recorded how they were able to complete work when it suited them.

When comparing data for those training to teach through the medium of Welsh (Table 2), the proportion of students enrolled on the new PGCE is slightly below that of all the other PGCE courses in Wales combined (19.7%, compared to 20.7%) (StatsWales, 2022d). Proportionately, there is a significantly higher number of students (38.5%) within the new flexible PGCE's secondary cohort studying in Welsh than in the primary cohort

(11.5%). This is presumably a reflection of the subjects offered (i.e. Welsh being one of the three subjects available). There is also a greater proportion of salaried students (24.7%) studying in Welsh. This reflects the higher relative numbers on the salaried route within secondary, compared to primary.

Evaluation of student teachers' standards on the programme shows that Welsh-speaking student teachers tend to achieve higher teaching practice standards compared to their peers who are studying through the medium of English. The results are similar for academic assessment, with more Welsh-speaking student teachers achieving the highest 'distinction grade'. A possible explanation is that those entering the programme on the salaried route entered with higher degree classifications and therefore had a higher starting point, and a greater proportion of Welsh-speaking students are on this route.

Widening access into teaching

Widening access to the teaching profession and providing a route for those who are unable or do not wish to undertake a one-year PGCE is a key feature of the new PGCE, and supports many to solve some of the barriers they were experiencing in entering the teaching profession. Diversifying the teaching workforce is an integral element of this, and the barriers experienced by those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, those with disabilities and Welsh language speakers entering the teaching profession are important here, as well as for those wishing to move into teaching from another career.

Individuals decide to make a career change and move into the profession for a range of social and personal reasons (Bar-Tal et al., 2020; Bauer et al., 2017). Providing opportunity for career changers and individuals with other family and community commitments can contribute to the professionals in the classroom reflecting society. There is potential for these career changers to add value to the profession, as their life experiences and other attributes are transferable to the classroom (Williams, 2013; Paniagua & Sánchez-Martí, 2018; Varadharajan & Schuck, 2017). However, one small-scale study concluded that although the resilience that career changers bring to teaching is significant, they are less likely to complete their training when compared to 'first career entrants' (Wilkins & Comber, 2015, p. 1015; Wilkins, 2017). Yet, the research drawing this conclusion is referring to one-year PGCE programmes. It is concluded that, although the entry quality of student teachers is critical, the quality and appropriateness of ITE needs to take sufficient account of prior experience and specific needs (Wilkins, 2017).

Currently the flexible PGCE is mirroring the other routes into teaching in Wales regarding Welsh language and ethnicity profiles. With the drive to diversify the workforce, these aspects of recruitment are important, and there is much ongoing work in Welsh teacher education underway in an effort to address this (Lester & Price, 2021; Welsh Government, 2021b; 2021c). Barriers identified by Minority Ethnic student teachers and teachers, such as finance, the need for targeted support, and supportive mentoring during teacher training, are critical to improve opportunities to widen access to the teaching profession further (Davies et al., 2021, 2022). One student teacher from a Minority Ethnic background reflected that the fact they had been accepted onto the programme as they have 'a different background' had been particularly supportive for their career: 'I think accepting me for the course (having a different background)

supported me to develop my career' (PS32). However, barriers such as finance are not only experienced by those from Minority Ethnic backgrounds; one student teacher reflected on the financial and time implications being prohibitive for them if they studied on a one-year PGCE: because they lived in a more rural part of the country, it would have required extensive travelling and was reported to be unfeasible with a family. Therefore, the flexible PGCE offered them the opportunity to train, which they would otherwise not have been able to pursue:

I have children and childcare responsibilities so I wanted a course that would enable me to balance work/study and life. I also live about 1 hr drive from the nearest onsite University so I would have had to spend a lot of time travelling to seminars otherwise. The remote studying also suited me because of the flexibility it offered. (SS26)

In accordance with the recommendations for the ITE sector (Lester & Price, 2021), the flexible PGCE programme is finalising a Black and Minority Ethnic recruitment strategy, which will include actions across a range of aspects, such as recruitment, course content and programme processes.

In September 2020, 138 enrolled on the new two-year PGCE. By March 2021, there were 126 on the programme. Reasons for programme withdrawals are being examined, as understanding these will support retention (Roberts, 2012). Early findings suggest that almost all withdrawn students have very particular personal circumstances, which prove a barrier to completion of the programme. Often, these personal circumstances relate to similar commitments outlined below as the same reasons that the flexible routes appeal to them in the first place. A range of factors can influence an individual's reasoning for withdrawing from teacher education, including disappointment with the profession and finding the programme difficult (Chambers et al., 2010; Meens & Bakx, 2019). A lack of investigation regarding this is a significant limitation of this study and something that should be turned to in future if the flexible PGCE programme is to ensure that all barriers to access and course completion are to be addressed.

Student teachers' caring and other commitments

Five student teachers reported that they help or support adult family members with long-term physical or mental health or problems related to age, and 33 of the 48 student teachers who responded to the survey reported that there are children in their household. The high proportion of student teachers with children reflects the older age range of the student cohort. Many report having more than one child, with most of the children younger than 12 years of age. Five student teachers also reported that their children have additional care needs. No comparable data are available for student teachers on one-year PGCE programmes in Wales. However, some of these other commitments are the very reason why individuals decide to pursue the two-year training option. It could also be assumed that as the age profile of one-year PGCE students is younger they are less likely to have several children. The decision of student teachers to enrol on the two-year PGCE supports the views of others who highlight the advantages of training to teach over a longer period of time (Twiselton, 2017; Vineer, 2020).

Some of the student teachers with children and other commitments reported how beneficial they found the fact that they could study part-time. One student qualified their

response with an observation that they had seen how ‘intense’ it could be doing the qualification via the one-year route, and with a young family their preference was the more flexible option: ‘I had heard it [a one-year full-time PGCE] was very intense and involved a lot of time commitment which would be impossible for someone with a family and childcare responsibilities’ (SS26). Another part-time student with a similar family situation reaffirmed this; commenting that their main priority was to study via a route that would fit around their children and reported that they were finding the course very fulfilling:

It’s brilliant, I love it – it’s so much more fulfilling than I thought it would be. I love this course. I feel that I’ve got a lot of knowledge and experience but at the same time I feel that I’m learning something which is good. (PI71)

One part-time student teacher commented on the benefit of being able to work in different schools as a teaching assistant providing cover for staff while studying part-time. This is possible because the course is over a longer period of time and there is time for study and work: ‘[I’m] doing supply TA [teaching assistant] work with an agency so working in different schools, this is useful as I’m seeing different approaches and schools’ (PI72).

Career changers

Immediately before starting the new Open University Partnership PGCE almost all student teachers reported being in employment, with 51% employed for more than 31 hours a week. Education was the dominant sector for their educational work experience. The flexible routes have therefore provided a route of progression to low-paid teaching assistants who are seeking to upskill their qualifications and gain professional and financial recompenses for the education experiences they have developed throughout their previous careers. Almost all also reported some work experience in non-educational settings; 75% with three or more years’ and 27% with more than 10 years’ experience. The sectors students reported to have work experience in at some point in their career are wide-ranging and include management, engineering, marketing, accountancy, computing, journalism, legal services, manufacturing, scientific research and logistics. Although it is suggested that it can be a challenge for some who pursue teaching as a second career to transfer such skills to their practice (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021), others propose there are benefits for learners of having teachers who possess a broad knowledge and wider skill base, which allows learners to be exposed to a cross-section of society (Williams, 2013). This is illustrated by one student teacher’s comments during an interview:

The Welsh Government is doing a lot to attract others into teaching. During interview I was asked what you bring to the PGCE from other work experience. When I enquired [for other courses], the response was negative as I had not gone straight into it [teaching] from degree. I didn’t find that in Wales, it was more supportive of bringing other skills to the profession. (PI71)

Other student teachers interviewed also acknowledged their own extensive work experience. A few commented that they had lacked confidence to pursue teaching immediately

after their undergraduate degree as they believed they were too close in age to the children they would be teaching. For example:

After my degree I had thought about going into teaching, I spoke to several teachers at the time, but felt I was too inexperienced in life and there would not be a big enough age gap to teach secondary, I didn't have the confidence then. (SI80)

For many, engaging with children during voluntary and/or paid work had reaffirmed they wanted to teach, and they believed the life skills gained during work experience aligned well with teaching. For example: 'I had the chance to work with children in my previous roles and it became my passion and part of the job I liked the most' (PS30). Offering a flexible route into teaching, as opposed to the traditional one-year full-time programme, is evidence of the recognition of the importance of those with prior work experience in both education and other sectors to the teaching workforce (George & Maguire, 2019).

Student teachers emphasised how they value the opportunity to change careers. For example, one student teacher on the salaried route commented: 'I wanted to complete the course in a way that I would be able to keep my income to support my family' (PS54). The opportunity offered by the new PGCE for people to move from alternative careers to train to teach also contributes to the development of the student teachers' personal teaching constructs as they draw on their extensive experience outside education to help inform their teacher identity, which will ultimately result in a multi-dimensional teacher workforce (Williams, 2013). One student teacher expands their reason for training to teach later in their career:

Maybe I should have done it [the PGCE] a few years ago, but at the same time I would never have made this decision a few years ago, I needed to do my career journey. I would never have been in the position to be the teacher I'm going to be if [I had trained to teach straight after university]. I needed my life experiences to pursue other things [...]. I think it is always good to have different experiences in a school, not just straight out of university teachers but to have some life experiences in there too. (PI83)

Flexible learning

Thirteen out of 48 student teacher survey respondents (27%) commented that they had previously applied for a full-time one-year PGCE. Reasons for not undertaking these programmes included joining graduate training schemes and seven student teachers declined an offer to study a one-year PGCE, preferring the flexible blended distance programme instead. The necessity to earn an income and childcare/family commitments were reasons mentioned by 31 other student teachers as to why they had never applied to train to teach via a one-year PGCE. Seventeen student teachers mentioned the need to maintain an income, with nine emphasising childcare and family commitments. Other reasons reported by a few student teachers included the need for flexibility for any course they studied as they desired to remain in their current role. For example as a Teaching Assistant in their school, which they are able to do on the salaried route. Others thought that the workload of a one-year course would be 'too much', wishing to complete the work over a longer period of time, or they reported that they lacked confidence or believed they were 'too old to return to

full-time study and go back to university' (PS42). The following illustrate some of the explanations provided by the student teachers as they reported some of the barriers to accessing ITE:

Coming from full-time employment with bills to pay, it wasn't financially viable to take a year out to study. (SS28)

[I'm] not able to quit the job to study full-time and it is not guaranteed I would have a job as a teacher once I was qualified. (PS33)

I applied for both the Open University and [a one-year PGCE] at the same time. I was accepted by both and chose the Open University as doing a one-year PGCE would have meant a loss of income and potentially a lack of time to fit in other commitments. (PI81)

Two students qualified for the Welsh Government's Teacher Training Incentive Scheme (Welsh Government, 2020c). Yet, they rejected this opportunity, which would have supported them through a one-year PGCE. Reasons for not accessing the grant included: the incentive funding was insufficient, having observed the intensity of others studying for a PGCE over a single year; the part-time route was more appealing; and there was a need to keep the security of an existing employed role in a school.

The flexibility of the part-time route for disabled students has been noted and one student explained further that they welcomed being able to complete the academic study at times best suited to them. One of the key stakeholders (a Regional Educational Consortia representative) reinforced these views, commenting that the two-year PGCE is flexible so 'students can study when they wish' (S07). Also, the opportunities to collaborate with fellow student teachers across Wales, who are training in different types of schools, was viewed positively. Another stakeholder (a school representative) suggested that the effective structuring of the programme appeals to 'a wide audience and offers great flexibility in how it can be accessed' (S11), with an additional school representative also commenting that the two-year programme is beneficial to student teachers as it allows more time for them to 'fill any gaps in knowledge and experience' (S09).

When discussing which elements of the PGCE the student teachers found most helpful to support their progress, the ongoing support of their university tutor dominated (mentioned by 15/45), with the availability of online materials (including seminars and Practice Learning Activities), and the ability to study flexibly at times best suited to their circumstances also prominent. For example, 'the flexibility of study time has helped around family commitments' (SS35). This re-emphasises the conclusions drawn by others that the learner is at the centre of the experience (Saba, 2016), as well as the importance of being able to make and establish relationships with both the university tutor as well as staff in the placement school (Jeong, 2018). Two student teachers re-emphasised the two-year period of study as also being critical to success: '[The] two year course means I have more time with my daughter while she is so young' (SS21); 'Although there is a lot of work it is flexible and fits around my family much better than a one year course could' (PS29). Others support this as being desirable in teacher education, particularly as it means student teachers would spend more time in the classroom (Giannakaki et al., 2011; Twiselton, 2017; Vineer, 2020).

A couple of secondary salaried student teachers conveyed the benefits of being embedded in a school. They are in paid employment in a school for part of the week,

and one student teacher reported 'better relationships with school staff, I feel connected to what I'm doing' (SI69). Another reported that working alongside their study helped to develop rapport with staff and children alike and helped their progress:

I am constantly in lessons with students and I can practice behaviour management techniques and build up relationships with pupils because I am there all day every day as a full time member of staff. They don't see me as a student teacher so much and they don't have that 'we can mess around in lessons' and that is invaluable and the school agree too and the school is so keen on having students come through this way because you have a better rapport with the pupils and the teachers that you progress so much faster in your learning. (SI84)

Also, being in the school all the time means they are able to observe sequences of lessons as opposed to individual lessons. This was viewed very positively, giving student teachers confidence for the increase in timetabled teaching required as they progress with the programme. Research undertaken to explore the increased role of schools in teacher education reports on the importance of the greater emphasis now being awarded to the school placement experiences (Brown et al., 2015). Others have also reported on the benefits of student teachers spending more time in schools and the positive impact this can have on confidence and working relationships (George & Maguire, 2019).

Waters (2020), in making recommendations to the Welsh Government about the newly qualified induction phase, notes that student teachers need to observe the establishing of classroom routines, which are usually best observed at the beginning of the academic year. Most student teachers miss this critical period as they are commencing their PGCE studies and completing university inductions. During the second year of the flexible PGCE, student teachers commence at the beginning of the academic year enabling them to observe and participate actively in the new routines at the start of year. The transition from ITE can also be challenging for some and influences teacher retention. A sense of belonging is important (Gordon, 2020), and the flexible PGCE offers student teachers longer to establish these working relationships over a two-year period, along with the possibility that many on the salaried route will be employed once they graduate in their placement school. It is also reported that those with more experience in practice teaching are less likely to leave the teaching profession after the first year (Ingersoll et al., 2015). Exploring this particular benefit of the more flexible PGCE for teacher retention could offer a focus for future research.

Conclusion

The Open University Partnership PGCE Programme in Wales is an important element of the ITE options available and the wider education reform underway in Wales. Partnership working between universities and schools positions schools at the forefront of training the teaching workforce. The development and particular recent emphasis on distance learning, as a result of the lockdowns, reflect the impact of technology on learners' opportunities. Research has concluded that learners prefer to experience face-to-face contact and also have the flexibility of online provision, and the blended distance pedagogy of the new PGCE delivers this. The PGCE supports student teachers to draw on the expertise of school practitioners and university academics, as well as working with

their peer group. These different communities illustrate the foundations for collaborative communities of practice that will be integral throughout the teachers' careers.

The range of data explored provide evidence of the flexible blended distance pedagogy of the PGCE's ability to contribute to diversifying the teacher workforce, as it offers solutions to some of the barriers identified by those wishing to become teachers. Student teachers and stakeholders agree that the programme's flexible delivery helps recruitment. The average age of the current student teacher cohort is older than those who usually study a one-year PGCE and these individuals bring with them a range of work and life experiences that will strengthen the teacher workforce. Welsh speakers are performing at a high level on the programme, yet there is still more to be accomplished if the programme is to attract a more diverse student cohort. This is significant for all ITE partnerships across Wales and The Open University continues to contribute to support wider strategic developments that will improve this, specifically the ongoing developments to support the recruitment of those from Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

Although a relatively new programme, and with the limitations of a small-scale case study completed during the early implementation of the programme, over a short time period, implementing a flexible blended distance pedagogy for teacher education is beginning to show signs that it has the potential to address some of the challenges in teacher recruitment. The blended distance pedagogy format delivers the benefits of learning both face to face and online, with the student teacher always at the centre of a process able to access lectures and resources when convenient for them. The flexibility offered by the part-time and salaried options of the programme enable individuals to train to teach who would otherwise have been unable to enter the teaching workforce. Student teachers on the flexible PGCE are training to teach shortage subjects and students are completing placements in schools across Wales, including those in rural locations. Further research is proposed to investigate the reasons for withdrawal from the flexible route. The cohort will also be followed through to employment and research to understand the barriers experienced by disabled students and those from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority backgrounds to train to teach continues.

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