

**The Impact of Quality Assurance on Mentor Training in Initial Teacher Education Partnerships:  
A UK Perspective**

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**Abstract**

Over the last two decades, reforms to initial teacher education in England have formalised the partnership agreements between universities and partner schools, and increased the emphasis on quality assurance of the system. These changes are discussed within the context the University of Nottingham Partnership and in relation to the role of its school-based mentorship programme in particular. The processes for collecting routine, but formal evaluation data for quality assurance purposes are described. As the partnership has matured, positive relationships between university tutors and mentors have enabled mentors to develop within a less formal framework, and thereby to improve the quality of the course.

## **Introduction**

The effect of recent changes to teacher education in England has been dramatic in two significant areas: the formalisation of partnerships between university departments of education and schools, and an increased emphasis on quality assurance of initial teacher training (ITT). There has been a move to increasing prescription of what teacher training courses in university departments of education should provide in the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) course, the traditional route into secondary school teaching for graduates. As [Young notes in this issue](#), substantial prescription started with the setting up of the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE) in the early 1980s. It increased with the requirements to set up partnerships for school-based teacher training (DFE, 1992), and with the establishment of the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), which replaced CATE under the 1994 Education Act. An effect of these changes was that classroom teachers were expected to have a significant role in training student teachers and inducting them into the profession, leading to an increased and widespread emphasis on the role of the school-based mentor in initial teacher education.

Among the changes introduced by Circular 9/92 (DFE, 1992), was the requirement that university tutors and mentors assess students against a set of competences, following the government's skills-based, apprenticeship model of teacher training. The rigorous new schools inspection body, Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), with its emphasis on standards, was allocated responsibility for the inspection of initial teacher training at this time. The competences were replaced by Standards for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in 1998 (DfEE, 1998), which were then substantially revised to form the Professional Standards for QTS in 2002 (DfES, 2002).

A key process in setting up, maintaining and developing teacher education partnerships became the provision of mentor training by university departments, which has, in turn, had a major effect on the work of teacher educators in universities, through the development of training programmes and closer liaison with mentors in schools. Tied to this more school-based training model has been an increasing emphasis on quality assurance of all aspects of initial teacher training, in the context of 'a quality control era'

in the wider context of work in the United Kingdom (Storey & Hutchinson, 2001). The most recent Requirements for Initial Teacher Training (ITT), published with the new professional Standards (DfES, 2002), are the most stringent to date. Along with the revised inspection framework for initial teacher training (OfSTED, 2002), they place a significant emphasis on the management and quality assurance of initial teacher training partnerships. The Requirements for Initial Teacher Training (TTA, 2002) set out standards for quality assurance that 'aim to ensure that the providers of ITT establish the means to achieve and maintain high quality' (TTA, 2002, p. 107). The guidance then goes on to outline how quality assurance procedures need to cover all aspects of provision and that this will be achieved through systems that monitor and evaluate training and the achievements of trainees. There is also an expectation that evidence from quality assurance procedures will be 'used to determine priorities for action as well as for target-setting'.

Central to the movement towards more school-based initial teacher education is the role of the mentor as the key figure in supporting the professional growth and development of student teachers during school-based elements of ITT. It is important to consider different conceptions of what it is to be a mentor in the context of these changes to initial teacher education in the UK, and thus changing conceptions of learning to teach, and there is now a considerable body of research and literature in this area (e.g. Arthur, Davison & Moss, 1997; Brooks and Sykes, 1997; Furlong & Maynard, 1995; Hawkey, 1997, 1998). It is also interesting to note that this increased attention to mentoring is an international phenomenon in education (e.g. Cope and Stephen, 2001; Franke & Dahlgren, 1996; Long, 1997; Wang, 2001), as it has been in other spheres of work (Caldwell & Carter, 1993). Recent research on mentoring has particularly highlighted the tension between the concept of mentor-as-trainer and the concept of mentor-as-reflective-practitioner (or coach), able to support the student's learning needs within reflective practice (Schon, 1987). The first notion—mentor as trainer—is implied by the competence-based assessment model imposed by government, and the second—mentor as reflective practitioner—is promoted by university departments of education (Hawkey, 1998; see also [Piquemal, this issue](#)).

The notion of this tension between government and university agendas, which is developed further by YOUNG IN THIS ISSUE, will be useful in understanding the context of the development of initial teacher training partnerships. Against this background, this article explores the impact of the introduction of quality assurance procedures on the professional development of school-based mentors by the University of Nottingham Partnership over the last decade.

### **The Role of the School-Based Mentor in the University of Nottingham Partnership**

The University of Nottingham Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) is a well-established course and university tutors have always worked with local schools to provide students with experience of practical teaching. As in other universities, the University of Nottingham Partnership was established in 1992 in response to circular 9/92 (DfE, 1992). A partnership committee made up of both school-based and university-based staff, manages the partnership and there are clearly articulated roles and responsibilities for all involved in working with student teachers. The present University of Nottingham Partnership includes 132 partner schools and has approximately 700 trained mentors across the six teaching subjects covered by the partnership. In addition to trained mentors, each partnership school has a trained coordinator with responsibility for administering all aspects of the PGCE partnership arrangements. The coordinator is most likely to be a senior manager in the school responsible for staff development. An important aspect of the coordinator's role is that of quality assurance within the school linked to student entitlements and to the standard of reporting and evaluation in relation to students' professional development.

The central role of the subject mentor is to provide support and guidance to student teachers during the school-based elements of teacher education courses. In the University of Nottingham Partnership this entails working with students on three distinct school-based placements: a serial school experience, block teaching practice and a school-based inquiry project. Following a formative assessment at the end of school experience, a formal assessment of practical teaching against the Professional Standards occurs by the

end of teaching practice. However, the PGCE qualification extends beyond the attainment of the Standards for QTS; it is particularly in the latter phase of the PGCE course that the programme encourages student teachers to develop a deeper understanding of professionalism and reflective practice through an inquiry-focused project. Throughout these school-based phases, university tutors monitor students' progress closely and undertake a minimum of four observation visits to each student while they are on placements over the PGCE year.

Mentoring is a familiar concept in schools today and many aspects of a teacher's role include elements of mentoring colleagues and pupils. The negotiated roles and responsibilities for mentors in the University of Nottingham Partnership fall into four broad areas: managing a student teacher's experience in school; planning an appropriate programme; facilitating professional learning; and assessing the student teacher's performance.

A challenge for any partnership is the planning of a mentor training programme that encourages the development of the particular skills and expertise needed to work effectively with student teachers; this is essential in order to assure the quality of ITT provision. The following section describes the programme that has been developed by the University of Nottingham Partnership to train and support mentors in their work with student teachers.

### ***Mentor training in the University of Nottingham Partnership***

An expectation of the Partnership is that all mentors will attend a new mentor training session before they start to mentor student teachers and that they then attend further mentor training session twice each year. The current pattern of the mentor training programme is given in Table 1.

**Table 1: Pattern of mentor training in the University of Nottingham PGCE year.**

<b>Training Event</b>	<b>Aims</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Date</b>
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<p>New Mentor In-Service Educational Training</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• familiarisation with course</li> <li>• mentoring role and responsibilities</li> <li>• generic mentoring skills and strategies</li> </ul>	<p>New mentors and experienced mentors new to University of Nottingham Partnership</p>	<p>mid-September and late-November</p>
<p>December Mentor In-Service Educational Training</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• meet TP students (if applicable)</li> <li>• update on course changes and developments for current year; review autumn term School Experience</li> <li>• issues for school-based placements</li> <li>• identify and share good practice</li> </ul>	<p>All mentors</p>	<p>mid-December</p>
<p>June Mentor In-Service Educational Training</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• course changes and developments for following year</li> <li>• review of current year</li> <li>• issues for autumn term School Experience</li> <li>• identify and share good practice</li> </ul>	<p>All mentors</p>	<p>late-June</p>

All formal training sessions for mentors are held at the University in the early evening after the end of the school day. Training sessions are generally subject specific and are facilitated by a university tutor and experienced subject mentors.

The training sessions for new mentors provide an overview of the PGCE course and the demands of the course from the student teacher’s perspective. There is also the

opportunity to discuss and compare the different roles and responsibilities negotiated for each of the participants in the ITT process. A significant development during the past decade has been the embedding of some of the basic, generic mentoring skills in teachers' routine work (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2000). This has meant that in the session for new mentors there is an assumption that the basic skills of lesson observation and feedback are already largely in place. The main focus is therefore on assessment and how to facilitate professional learning. This initial session is supported by a comprehensive guide that includes a range of distance-learning activities designed to extend and consolidate the new mentor's understanding of issues identified in the university-based session. Subsequent mentor sessions cover a range of themes and aim to provide information about current developments in initial teacher education as well as providing opportunities to further develop mentors' skills and understanding of student teacher development.

### **Effectiveness of mentor development**

The effectiveness of the mentor training programme is crucial to the quality assurance process within the PGCE Partnership. Training sessions are evaluated and informal feedback from mentors about the training programme is also sought; the information gained about how well the training programme meets their needs is fed back into the planning process. However, a more rigorous test of the effectiveness of mentor training is through evaluation of the quality of mentoring students actually experience on the course. Data for this is collected from all of the students each year, as well as from focussed evaluations from time to time. In addition to these internal evaluations, we also have independent evidence from External Examiners and OfSTED inspections about the quality of mentoring, and thus mentor training. We now look in more detail at how evaluation data from each of these three sources of evidence – mentors, students and external agents – informs us about the effectiveness of mentor training.

#### ***Mentors' evaluations***

Mentors' evaluations of the training they receive within the Partnership allow us to judge whether we have met the aims for the training session. They also tell us what mentors say they find useful about the training sessions, independently of our aims. Since the establishment of partnership, mentor training has been regularly reviewed by consultative groups of subject mentors and tutors, the members of which are also often involved in planning and delivering the subject-specific elements of mentor training sessions; we have also conducted focus group evaluations. However, in order to elicit more formal evaluations of mentor training across the whole course, we administered a questionnaire to all mentors attending the main training event of the academic year 2002/3.

The responses to the questionnaire provided useful confirmation of other evidence we have on the turnover of mentors in the partnership. Just over half of mentors who attended the session had mentored for less than two years, with this being higher for the subjects of English, modern foreign languages, mathematics and science, all of which have been designated 'shortage subjects' by the TTA. While some mentors are considerably more experienced, these are in the minority: less than twenty per cent had mentored for five years or more.

The questionnaire invited mentors to comment in general on the two INSET events they are expected to attend each year, in December and June, and on the new mentor training, if they had attended this recently. They were reminded of the aims of the sessions (see Table 1) and were asked to identify what they found most and least useful about each event in the year, and whether they had any other comments or suggestions. The following comments are typical of what mentors said they found most useful about this event:

*Making explicit mentoring roles and responsibilities.*

*Good familiarisation with course – excellent introduction to the world of mentoring.*

*Discussion of roles, ability to ask questions, establishing a point of contact.*

*General information and expectations given clearly. All questions answered.*



*Everything – especially meeting tutors.*

*I found it extremely useful, thank you! It has given me peace of mind!*

Meeting the student about to come on placement in their school is most commonly perceived as one of the most useful aspects of the December training session, with over two-thirds of mentors mentioning this. Otherwise, it is strikingly clear that they are most likely to perceive the most important outcome for training sessions generally as receiving information about the PGCE course, particularly updates on course changes, and having the opportunity to take part in discussions with fellow mentors.

Out of the 175 mentors, only 33 identified ‘least useful aspects’ of the December training, whereas 158 of them had identified ‘most useful aspects’; the equivalent figures for June are eight, and 64 respectively. The stated least useful aspects were diverse, and sometimes idiosyncratic, such as not having a student on placement (mentors are encouraged to come anyway, if they wish, to keep in touch with the course), not liking the timing of the event or feeling tired. Interestingly, seven mentors did indicate that they would have preferred to have less time spent in discussion groups with other mentors. Clearly we do need to consider the most effective and efficient ways of running these training sessions, and to balance the needs of mentors with different training needs and preferences. There is certainly a small minority of mentors who have an extremely transmissional model of training (as one put it, she would *"Rather not have discussion groups but just rattle through it."*) However, those wanting shorter training sessions with less discussion are clearly out-numbered by those who welcome the opportunity to talk to other mentors, about the course and about wider issues, and wish that this did not have to be so rushed:

*Just need more time to discuss.*

*It all seemed very rushed.*

*Would be nice to have more time for discussion with colleagues about current issues.*

Both the focus group and questionnaire evaluations suggest that there is generally a high level of satisfaction with the organisation of the PGCE course and with mentor training amongst mentors. Over the years we have developed a pattern of mentor training that seems to meet the needs of mentors and to deliver the partnership's training objectives. A cynical observation might be that it is inevitable that mentors have a fairly instrumental view of training, finding information about the course the most useful aspect of training sessions. However, this does not imply what it would have done ten years ago. When seen in the context of a changing profession, with lesson observation and mentoring skills being expected of teachers as part of their normal work, it may just be that there is now less of a need for general training in mentoring skills and strategies as part of PGCE mentor training. Teachers come to PGCE mentoring with experience of mentoring already in place, even if only as someone who has been mentored.

This was not the case ten years ago, when new mentors themselves would have been trained in the age of the autonomous professional (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2000). At that time mentoring was not built into systems of professional development in schools, and a large part of new mentor training was about introducing them to the concept. We have also seen that mentors value meeting students before they come in to their schools, and appreciate the opportunity to discuss PGCE issues, and other matters, with colleagues from other schools. Many clearly enjoy mentor training, finding it relevant to their own practice and valuable for their professional development. Their investment in the partnership is part of their acceptance of their wider role within a postmodern professionalism.

### ***Students' evaluations of mentors***

Another source of information on the effectiveness of the mentor training comes from student evaluations. At the end of each school-based phase of the course the students evaluate the quality of support received from mentors (as well as from coordinators and tutors) with both qualitative and quantitative data being collected. The evaluation is given a high profile and each year over 97% of the total cohort complete and return a written evaluation. The quantitative data provides evidence of whether or not the student teachers

are receiving their entitlements as described in the partnership agreement. An example of the data collected is the number of occasions a student teacher was formally observed teaching and received written feedback which has shown an increase over the period shown. The students are also asked to evaluate the quality of support received in relation to the specific roles and responsibilities of the mentors. Each year (1995-2003) at least 94% of the students rate their mentors as either helpful or very helpful. These figures consistently demonstrate that student teachers find their mentors to be helpful and supportive during their main teaching practice. The following comments are typical of those made by students:

*My subject mentor has been an absolute star! I had an hour meeting with him every week in order to discuss progress and set targets. I felt that I could speak to him anytime. He always made time to see me.*

*Constant guidance and supervision was provided not only by my mentor, but the rest of the staff. Great emphasis was placed upon evaluations, as it was one of my targets to develop. Thanks to the protected period every week for mentor meeting I had the opportunity to set targets, discuss my progress and solve any problems, such as preparation for interview, national curriculum aspects and assessment within the school's policy.*

*My subject mentor was excellent. She was always available to give support, guidance and supervision whenever I needed as well as through regular meetings. She would consult all of the staff I worked with, to feedback on my progress and assist the setting of targets. She was always keen to ensure that I met my targets and made the most of the practice.*

Qualitative comments made by students describing supportive mentors generally fall into the following categories:

- gave helpful feedback on lessons;
- supportive;
- professional, approachable and encouraging;

- willing to discuss any problems; helped me to evaluate my learning;
- helped me to set targets and implement them;
- frequent meetings to help development

These comments help to develop a picture of a successful mentor from the student teachers' perspective. The minority of students who each year cite their mentors as being unhelpful, generally characterise these mentors as being negative, provide only minimal contact, offer advice too vague to be helpful and give insufficient time being available due to pressure in school. The following comments from student teachers exemplify the "unhelpful mentor":

*Quite cold, distant and unapproachable did meet once a week near enough for tutorials, yet quite unfriendly and unhelpful. The other staff more than made up for this.*

*Subject mentor seemed to have a lot of roles to play and did not have much time for individual support. Some support was offered in setting targets and weekly meetings were fairly regular but overall I know I didn't receive as much support as others did.*

*Weekly meeting haphazard at times. We were not at any times on friendly terms. But that was probably personality clashes. Feedback was fairly constructive at times. Other English staff was more helpful.*

In addition to the routine evaluation processes described, evidence about the experiences and perceptions of students is also sought through a range of other evaluation processes whenever significant changes are made to the PGCE course. For example, when a new course structure was implemented in 1998/9 that represented major changes to comply with the requirements of Circular 9/98 (DFE, 1998). Most significantly this had entailed providing students with main placements in two different schools and 24 weeks in school in total, out of a 36-week course. Out of necessity, information about these changes had dominated mentor training in early 1998 and throughout 1998/9. In order to evaluate the new course, we decided to conduct a focus group evaluation with a group of

representative students at two points in this PGCE year: in January, between the two school-based placements and when the main method courses had been taught; and in June, at the end of the course. Whilst the first discussion had focussed largely on the university-based phases of the course and the pressure of coursework, in the second discussion, the students spent approximately forty-five minutes of the hour allocated discussing teaching practice and the mentoring they had received in their teaching practice schools. We found this useful in triangulating other sources of evaluation data, enabling us to confirm themes and priorities for mentor training within the quality assurance cycle.

At the start of the June 1999 focus group discussion, the ten students were asked what they thought were the strengths of the course. They were unanimous in agreeing with the first student to speak, who said, 'the main thing was the support from the university'. Other students went on to give examples of the support they'd received from tutors, and how they felt this had prevented them from 'giving up' at various points during teaching practice. Discussion then moved on to things that could be improved, and all the comments made related to their experience in schools, mostly to relatively practical issues such as the use of observation schedules. When invited to evaluate the support they had received from mentors on teaching practice discussion really took off. All of the students in the group felt that their mentors had been supportive; although one clearly felt his mentor had only been adequate, several of them said that their mentors had been very good. They viewed the mentor as crucial to each student's success, apparently less crucial than any other factors, including qualities of the particular student:

*Your mentor makes or breaks your teaching practice; it's as simple as that.*

They are concerned about fairness and equal opportunities. Whilst they clearly recognise that all students are different and all mentors are different, they argue that all students should receive the same level of support and, by implication, that this should be the level of support provided by the best mentors. On reviewing the video tape of the focus group, one comment best exemplified this view and seems worthy of exploration:

*I had a brilliant mentor. He was excellent, really supportive, but there's no quality assurance. We all know people who've had really bad experiences.*

This was a comment from a thoughtful student, and his use of the term 'quality assurance' was striking, particularly as the term was less prevalent at the time than it is now. In fact there was a well-established quality assurance system in place in 1998/9, although this has been refined since, and we had already collected evaluation data from the entire cohort of students, to be fed back to schools after the end of the course and to inform mentor training. It is also possible there was a post-OfSTED factor, in that mentors may have made a special effort to deliver the entitlement in the previous, inspected year (1998/9) and were more relaxed in 1998/9. With a course of approximately 300 students this translates to about 18 students who rated their mentors as unhelpful, across all six subjects, several of whom would have been students who had experienced major difficulties or who had been graded as borderline/fail. (There is an association between the students being borderline/fail and reporting that their mentors were unhelpful. Sometimes poor mentoring contributes to a student's problems, but more commonly it seems that struggling students are likely to be ungenerous in evaluating a mentor who has had to give them bad news about their progress.)

One would expect these 18 dissatisfied students to be particularly vocal about their negative experiences, and to be the subjects of gossip amongst their fellow students, and they may consequently have been perceived by other students as representing a greater proportion of the cohort than they actually did. Thus a more accurate translation of this student's comment might be: 'there's no quality assurance [that I know about]. We all know [the same] people who've had really bad experiences'.

There is no intention here to dismiss this student's constructive comment or his perception of the course. On the contrary, it seemed that we had two important things to learn from what he said. Firstly, about how important it is for us to continually improve our quality assurance procedures, with the aim of maximising the proportion of students on the course who receive their entitlements and find their mentors helpful. Secondly,

that we needed to be more explicit with students about quality assurance procedures, and about entitlements and expectations on the PGCE course more generally.

During the course of the focus group discussion, a number of quality assurance issues emerged that confirmed our priorities for mentor training at the time. We do not have space here to illustrate how these issues emerged from the discussion, but they clearly fall into three areas:

\* assessment: improving the reliability and validity of mentors' use of OfSTED grades in assessing students against the Standards for QTS

\*entitlements *and good practice*: ensuring that students have weekly meetings (entitlement) and that they are timetabled, if possible, and not rescheduled (good practice); ensuring that the minimum number of lesson observations with written feedback are received (entitlement) and that these occur regularly, with written feedback provided promptly (good practice)

\* mentoring *departments*: encouraging all members of the department to 'mentor' informally, alongside the designated mentor; encouraging more teachers to become trained mentors, particularly less experienced members of the department (which can also be seen as good practice).

In 1999, we saw that having two school placements meant that if a student had had a better than average mentor in the first school, he or she could be less satisfied with a less effective, but adequate, mentor in the second; in previous years, other students might not have realised they could have had a better experience. It also became clear that as students now spent more time in school, the quality of mentoring had become even more important to their experience of the course and the overall quality of training they received. Apart from the training involved in anticipating and consolidating major course changes, as with the introduction of partnership in 1992, the requirements of 1998 had again raised the stakes for mentor training and quality assurance. In the following section we consider two examples of ways in which university tutors have worked in partnership with school-based mentors to respond to mentor training priorities.

***Independent evidence on the effectiveness of mentor training:  
External Examiners and OfSTED***

There are two external mechanisms that provide independent evidence of the quality of the PGCE course, the traditional university external examining system and OfSTED inspections. Both of these processes result in reports on standards on the course and can make recommendations for improvements, which the partnership is obliged to respond to, as part of the quality assurance process. They thus have an important role in setting the agenda for mentor training.

Part of the external examining process provides evidence of the effectiveness of mentor training. In the case of the PGCE, experienced teacher educators from other universities, together with school-based colleagues with extensive experience of teacher education, act as external examiners to determine whether standards of teaching and assessment on the course are in line with national expectations. They are expected to make explicit reference to this in their reports, for example:

*The quality of mentoring was clearly high.* (External Examiner, 2002)

*The commitment of staff, the quality of students, the level of performance of students, and their appreciation of the support given them by both the university and schools are all indicative of a harmonious course. This is an excellent course and students are well prepared as reflective teachers. The course at Nottingham would be considered among the best in the UK.*  
(Chief External Examiner, 2003)

External examiners also talk to mentors and students about their experience of the course and draw conclusions about the quality of mentoring in schools, and about any changes in this compared to previous years:

*The student group commented very favourably on all aspects of the course. They felt that they were extremely well supported by the university tutors and by the staff in school.* (Chief External Examiner, 2003)



*No real criticism was made of the course and those which featured in previous years, such as the objectivity of assessment of classroom performance [and] the regularity of meetings with teaching practice mentors ... clearly were no longer seen as issues, despite our probing.*  
(External Examiner, 2002)

This last comment particularly reflects the impact of earlier cycles of formal and informal quality assurance. It identified the need for mentor training on assessment and the provision of weekly mentor meetings, which can then be seen to have had a positive effect on the standard of support provided by mentors.

The effectiveness of mentor training is further corroborated by evidence from OfSTED inspectors, who report independent inspections of the quality of initial teacher training provided by the partnership, within each subject, in both university-based and school-based phases of the course. Extracts from OfSTED reports for three different subjects in the last inspection of the University of Nottingham Partnership, in 2001, illustrate the kind of judgements made:

*Evidence from visits to partnership schools showed an unusually good level of training [of student teachers] by mentors. Very good use is frequently made of the weekly discussions. Mentors, fully appraised of their role, provide good quality feedback and provide good quality training which goes well beyond the limited focus on discipline and class management frequently seen in school based work.*

*Subject mentors generally provide impressively good guidance, which involves trainees in challenging and stimulating dialogue and makes an important contribution to their professional development. This represents a significant improvement compared with the last inspection.*

*Tutors ... maintain an excellent professional relationship with mentors through regular well-planned meetings, effective training and shared course evaluation, as well as school visits. This is a genuine partnership.*

These formal quality assurance processes provide regular feedback on the effectiveness of the mentor training programme in preparing mentors for their work with student teachers during the school-based phases of the course. In this way our partnership would appear to be operating in a similar way to other higher education institutions:

*In our national survey the most frequently mentioned mechanisms [for quality assurance] were: increased course documentation, proliferation of meetings, student feedback, tutor visits, staff development and training, external examining, university wide teaching quality assessment procedures and OfSTED inspections. (Furlong et al, 2000: p114)*

In addition to the routine mechanisms for quality assurances, there are other processes that inform and shape the mentor training programme. Next we consider the role of a one-off qualitative evaluation in establishing priorities for mentor training, followed by examples of ways in which particularly good practice can be disseminated across this partnership in order to support these training priorities.

### **Opportunistic Mentor Development: The Dissemination of Good Practice**

An important way in which quality assurance has had an impact on the development of mentors in the partnership has been through the opportunistic identification and dissemination of good practice. In terms of meeting entitlements and providing good quality mentoring the informal, qualitative monitoring aspects of quality assurance are as important as the formal data-collection aspects of quality assurance. Here we present examples demonstrating how this has been achieved with respect to two priority areas for mentor training: the student entitlement to a weekly meeting and the promotion of the mentoring department.

The Partnership agreement states that student teachers are entitled to regular, scheduled meetings with their mentor. The purpose of the weekly meeting is described in the documentation as ‘to discuss progress in relation to the Standards for QTS’. The weekly training meeting has been a recurring theme discussed at mentor training events over the past few years and this iterative process of discussion and reflection has helped the

partnership to define more explicitly not only the purpose of the meeting but also to establish the entitlement.

One area addressed has been a practical one of how mentors can manage to protect a regular time each week to meet with the student teachers. Mentors have found discussions about how some schools use the funding accompanying each student to support mentors by providing timetable alleviation or by protecting non-contact time to meet with students both interesting and, on occasions, enlightening. A further example is in the recording of the outcomes of the weekly training meeting. This practice started with one mentor in one school expecting the student to keep a written record of the meeting. This practice was shared with the relevant subject mentors at a training session, who agreed that it would be helpful to integrate this into their own practice. Following this success it was introduced at a whole course level and is now an integrated element of the course. Now that clear expectations have been established the focus in recent mentor training sessions has been on how best to encourage mentors to use the weekly training meeting for setting weekly targets that show a clear progression in terms of the student teacher's professional development.

The next example of opportunistic quality assurance through the dissemination of good practice relates to the third priority for mentor training originally identified by our student focus group: the promotion of mentoring departments. We had been encouraging schools in partnership to consider the concept of the mentoring department. This implies that although student teachers would always have one named mentor, they would feel supported by the whole department and other teachers would use mentoring strategies with them. In 2002 one of our long-standing partnership schools provided us with a more systematic model for fostering mentoring within a department.

This particular department was committed to having pairs of students for teaching practice – something else that we wish to promote – each with their own mentor, and needed a second mentor following staff changes. Rather than simply have the new mentor attend new mentor training and ask the experienced mentor for advice as necessary, they decided to induct the new mentor in a more structured and formal way. The experienced

mentor worked alongside the new mentor, who was in her third year of teaching. To start with, weekly mentor meetings were held together, with both students. The students had some paired teaching on their timetables, which facilitated this process. By about a third of the way through teaching practice the mentors started to meet separately with their own students, but continued to discuss mentoring issues together. The two mentors conducted the interim assessment of both students against the Standards for QTS together, and the experienced mentor continued to monitor the assessments carried out by the new mentor, checking the final assessment profile carefully. This pattern of mentoring a pair of student teachers worked so well, receiving excellent evaluations from the students concerned, that we invited both mentors and both students to participate in a group video interview. This was then used in training in the autumn of the following academic year with all mentors for the subject concerned to promote mentoring department and paired placements. Edited transcripts of the video were then incorporated into training materials to be used across all six subjects in the following summer.

It was interesting to see how this model of mentor induction continued successfully in the original department over the subsequent two years, adapting to changing circumstances. In 2003 the experienced mentor continued to support the new mentor, again with a pair of student teachers doing some paired teaching. The mentors jointly conducted the assessment of both students just before the experienced mentor left for maternity leave three weeks before the end of teaching practice. The 'new' mentor alone then mentored both students for the final weeks. In 2004 this mentor then inducted another teacher, in her second year of teaching, following the same structured model through which she had been inducted herself. It may be significant that all three teachers mentioned had been students on the University of Nottingham PGCE themselves, and were thus already familiar with and appreciative of the mentoring role within the partnership. The department as a whole was also committed to the support of student teachers and new entrants to the profession. One of the student teachers mentored in 2003 was appointed to the department, which will now have had a newly qualified teacher for each of four consecutive years.

From mentor evaluations one of the most valued aspects of mentor training sessions is the opportunity to discuss mentoring issues with colleagues from other schools. The opportunity to share good practice amongst peers appears to be the most effective form of mentor development. The role of the university tutor is an important one here. They need to be able to identify the good practice that they observe in schools and then to facilitate the sharing of this with other mentors. Also the tutor needs to be able to collate the outcomes of mentor discussions and transform them into resources that can then be used to develop the skills of the subject mentors. The significance of the quality of the relationships between the tutor and mentors should not be underestimated, nor should the complexity of the tutor's role.

### **Conclusions**

In the University of Nottingham Partnership an increased emphasis on quality assurance has, in various ways, had a significant impact on the development of our mentor training programme. It is important to see this in the national context of a response to the formalisation of ITT partnerships, during a period when:

*the system (has been) moved from one of diversity and autonomy to one of unanimity and central control. What the government and particularly the TTA, had wanted, was a common system, with common standards and procedures no matter who was providing the training or where: this was how the TTA defined quality (Furlong et al., 2000).*

The need for external accountability has inevitably meant that there has been a continued, general tightening up of procedures, documentation and the evidence base for assessment. The influence of quality assurance on the mentor training process has included a deliberate 'ratcheting-up' model of training through sharing good practice and then gradually making this an expectation of training, and in some cases, an entitlement.

Parallel to these developments in ITT has been the changing nature of teachers' work and professionalism (Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996). To accommodate these changes our training programme for mentors has progressively focused less on generic mentoring and

observation skills, as these have become more widely expected of teachers in schools, and more on meeting standards and assessment issues since significant responsibility for these areas has been devolved to schools.

However, in working under the national drive for ‘unanimity and central control’ we have developed a model of quality assurance that remains responsive to the specific nature of our particular partnership. We have been able to identify different aspects of quality assurance that work in synergy with one another: the planned, routine formal evaluation mechanisms based on both internal and external sources of evidence; the planned one-off evaluations that identify training priorities at key points in course development; the opportunistic dissemination of good practice that relies on a collaborative approach to quality assurance between university tutors and school-based mentors. It is important to see these different aspects as part of an on-going, dynamic cycle of quality assurance that is responsive to both the changing national context and local factors such as the supply of mentors and history of the PGCE course. This responsiveness, in turn, relies on effective, well-established professional relationships across the partnership that extend beyond the statutory requirements. A quality assurance structure and mentor training programme that involves all participants in partnership can respond to change in a context of postmodern professionalism (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2000).

As far as possible, we adopt a collaborative model of partnership and mentors are encouraged to take more responsibility for the broader development of students, beyond practical teaching, through engagement with standards and with a greater focus on subject knowledge. The model of reflective practice is not only embodied in the PGCE course, but also in the partnership as a whole. The partnership is committed to collaboration and to involving mentors and coordinators in all aspects of the ITE process. All subject teams convene subject groups, made up of mentors and tutors, which meet termly and plan all aspects of the subject specific course and mentor training. Although this is a joint endeavour, the implementation of decisions made by the group and the need to comply with all statutory requirements, remains a much greater priority for tutors, as accountability ultimately rests with the university. Unless this changes, the partnership will always remain an unequal one, however genuine it is.

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