**DISCUSSION PAPER -**

**THE ACCREDITATION OF PROGRAMMES FOR INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION DELIVERED IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

**Background**

1. The accreditation, on behalf of the Department of Education (DE), of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes delivered in Northern Ireland by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), is one of GTCNI’s statutory functions (under Article 37 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (as amended by The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (Approval of Qualifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007)). The accreditation process is conducted in accordance with the guidance set out in:

* DE Circular 2010/03 – “Initial Teacher Education: Approval of Programmes” (**Annex A**); and
* GTCNI’s “The Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programmes in Northern Ireland – Accreditation Process” (as agreed for 2018-19), including the Terms of Reference at Annex 5. (**Annex B**)

1. As set out in the Circular (2010/03), the accreditation of ITE programmes lasts for four years. For PGCE programmes (involving all four HEIs), accreditation last took place in 2019. The BEd undergraduate programmes delivered by Stranmillis and St Mary’s University Colleges were last accredited in 2020, meaning that all ITE programmes should be reaccredited over the next two years.
2. In considering the need for reaccreditation at this time, it is important to understand the changed context in which this process could be run:
   1. GTCNI is currently operating without its Council and with no in-house educator expertise to meaningfully assess ‘portfolios of evidence’ such as those used previously.
   2. Those portfolios contained evidence aligned with the 27 teaching competences set out in GTCNI’s 2007 document [“Teaching: The Reflective Profession”](https://gtcni.org.uk/cmsfiles/Resource365/Resources/Publications/The_Reflective_Profession.pdf). Subsequent work, under the auspices of DE’s Learning Leaders (LL) Strategy, has developed and recommended the transition to a reduced set of twelve LL aligned competences. These were presented to and agreed by GTCNI’s Policy Registration and Regulation Committee but were not agreed by the full GTCNI Council prior to it being stood down on 13 December 2021.
3. Additionally, it has become apparent that aspects of Circular 2010/03 are dated and may reflect a rigidity (in areas such as minimum entry requirements) which may now only serve to create unnecessary barriers to entry for students aspiring to teach.
4. Similarly, GTCNI’s current qualifications rules set out qualifications accepted for registration purposes. These have been identified as unnecessarily inflexible in their inability to take any account of an applicant’s successful teaching experience (or other compensatory evidence) when assessing a candidate’s application for registration. In this, it is arguably creating barriers to entry into the profession, particularly for teachers who have been educated outside of the United Kingdom (UK) or Republic of Ireland (RoI).
5. In this context, the Department accepts there is a need to revise DE Circular 2010/03, to review GTCNI’s qualifications rules and consider how the new LL teaching competences might be implemented in the absence of a GTCNI Council to endorse these changes. Any of these changes would typically require consultation with the teaching workforce and NI’s Teaching Unions, which in itself is problematic given the current state of industrial relations.
6. Nonetheless, the Department considers there is a pressing need to determine what options are available to facilitate some form of reaccreditation process. This is to avoid any potential for criticism for permitting current course accreditations to lapse in an uncontrolled manner which would undermine confidence in the quality of current ITE programmes and (arguably) jeopardises the quality of the teaching workforce in Northern Ireland.
7. While such criticisms would be a gross over-simplification of the situation, the Department would be keen to demonstrate the importance which DE and the HEIs have placed, and continue to place, on the quality of ITE provision. Accordingly, the Department’s preference would be to acknowledge that GTCNI cannot currently fulfil its historic role in reaccrediting NI ITE programmes, but to then demonstrate that an alternative process was followed which evidences the continuing quality of ITE provision and supports a decision by the Department to ‘reapprove’ the programmes, even in the absence of GTCNI involvement.

**For Discussion**

1. DE Circular 2010/03 reflects four different aspects of scrutiny and validation:  
   1. **Approval: *Provided by DE[[1]](#footnote-1).*** This is dependent upon evidence of need, accreditation by the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) and evidence from inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Approval permits ITE providers to offer programmes, the successful completion of which entitle individuals to seek registration with the GTCNI and thus be able to teach in grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland.
   2. **Accreditation: *Provided by GTCNI.*** Accreditation is concerned with the suitability of ITE programmes as a professional preparation which enables students successfully completing such programmes to register with the GTCNI. GTCNI accredits ITE programmes underpinned by the Requirements set out in Circular 2010/03. Accreditation is separate from academic validation.
   3. **Self-evaluation: *Undertaken by the HEIs.*** Self-evaluation is an internal process, making use of monitoring and evaluation processes which include the use of the framework of quality indicators agreed jointly by the ETI and the ITE providers. The purpose of self-evaluation is to identify necessary improvements, inform improvement plans and set measurable outcomes.
   4. **Inspection: *Undertaken by ETI*.** Inspection of ITE programmes is carried out by the ETI who make an evaluation of ITE provision. Inspection also audits and quality-assures the self-evaluation carried out by ITE providers, using the agreed quality indicators.

Additionally, in an earlier iteration of GTCNI’s reaccreditation process, it had also acknowledged the role in assuring the quality of ITE provision which is played by:

* 1. **Academic Validation: *Undertaken both internally by the HEIs and externally (by the Quality Assurance Association for Higher Education (QAA)).*** These two processes ensure that their initial teacher education programmes meet the necessary academic standards to enable HEIs to award degrees.

**Possible Ways Forward**

***Option 1***

1. DE could simply decide that since the last inspection, programmes have not changed significantly in their scope and delivery; and therefore (in the absence of any prospect of GTCNI being able to undertake a directly comparable reaccreditation process) that DE should make a determination that “what was satisfactory still remains satisfactory” and so it would reapprove the programmes for a further four-year period.
2. This approach would be defensible on the grounds that GTCNI is currently only operating to deliver its core functions and, given the absence of its Council and its planned closure, it is unable to make any major new strategic decisions. Equally, it currently lacks the educational expertise to repeat the reaccreditation process used previously.
3. This approach could only be claimed to have addressed one of the four pillars of appraisal used previously (***DE Approval***) and runs the risks of political, media and public criticism (and potentially criticism from within the profession) that the Department and HEIs have chosen to take the easiest route forward for themselves, knowingly risking the quality of our ITE provision and, by implication, the quality of our teaching workforce.

***Option 2***

1. The objective for ETI’s inspections of ITE programmes is primarily to confirm that the programmes are continuing to provide suitable professional preparation for their students, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to deliver the NI Curriculum effectively. As such, an inspection process could still be run as part of ETI’s 2023-24 work programme, and the Department could then choose to provide four-year reapprovals for all ITE programmes solely on the basis of ETI’s findings.  
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2. The previous round of ETI inspections was unable to fully complete its intended ‘in-class’ observations before the Covid-19 pandemic began to disrupt in-person lessons and lectures. These factors should not impact on inspections during 2023-24 and so, arguably, a fresh series of ETI inspections would provide an even more robust basis for DE to make a reapproval decision.
3. Subject to ETI’s conclusions, this would provide a clear evidence base that the programmes remain fit for purpose and well-aligned to the needs of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. In re-approving all existing programmes on this basis, this approach would address two of the four pillars of appraisal used previously (***ETI Inspection*** and ***DE Approval***).

***Option 3***

1. Under the last accreditation process, HEIs produced extensive portfolios of supporting evidence for their programmes based on the requirements set out in DE and GTCNI documents (**Annexes A & B**). In the absence of the internal skills within GTCNI to assess those portfolios, the Department would consider it nugatory and wasteful of HEI resources to ask that similar portfolios of evidence are now prepared.
2. As part of their previous rounds of inspections, ETI scrutinised the scope and content of the various ITE programmes and their delivery. Its report was presented to DE and Inspectors additionally met with the GTCNI accreditation team and verbally reported on its findings to help inform GTCNI’s deliberations. ETI’s inspections also produced recommendations for each course on areas for improvement and these were privately shared with each HEI.
3. The Department expects that all ETI recommendations for refinement or change in programmes will have been factored in to each HEI’s annual reflective self-evaluation processes, resulting in minor, incremental changes and improvements in programmes year-to-year. If existing self-reflective practices have been documented and these records can be shared in confidence with ETI, these could provide a comparatively “low effort” evidence base for the each HEI’s ongoing course development.
4. This evidence could allow ETI to determine that their previous recommendations had all been satisfactorily addressed and could help inform its next round of inspections. This could perhaps allow for a series of more focused “lighter touch” inspections than might otherwise have been considered necessary. Self-evaluation records would therefore provide a useful further evidence base to support DE reapproval of the programmes.
5. This hybrid approach would potentially address three of the four pillars of appraisal used previously (***HEI Self-Evaluation, ETI Inspection*** and ***DE Approval***).

**Questions**

***Q1. Are there any obvious areas of duplication across the four types of assessment used previously?***

***Q2. Are all of these stages still considered essential?***

***Q3. Could external QAA validation play a more prominent role in Departmental considerations of “Quality Assuring” our ITE provision?***

***Q4. Without creating any significant amount of new content, would the HEIs be able to evidence regular self-evaluation linked to changes in their programmes?***

***Q5. Would the HEIs be able to provide other supporting evidence of addressing previous ETI recommendations?***

***Q6. Are there any other options which would, without requiring excessive effort from the HEIs or ETI, still provide a robust and evidenced basis for DE reapproval of our ITE programmes?***

**ANNEX A**

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**ANNEX B**

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1. Given under [Article 67 of The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1986/594/article/67) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)