Investigating how Japanese universities prepare secondary teachers for sustained professional flourishing: mentoring, induction, and the foundations of a long career

Background and rationale

The mentoring of student and early career teachers is one of the most consequential aspects of teacher education, yet in England it remains unevenly understood and inconsistently practised (Allen, 2022; Murtagh et al., 2025). During initial teacher education, the quality of school-based mentoring varies significantly across partnerships, shaped by the availability, selection, and preparation of mentors as much as by programme design (Hobson et al., 2009). In the early career period, the implementation of the Early Career Framework has raised questions about whether a compliance-oriented approach to mentoring adequately supports the development of professional identity, purpose, and resilience. Too often, mentoring is framed around helping beginner teachers meet threshold standards rather than preparing them for sustained professional fulfilment across a long career (Spicksley & Kington, 2024).

These concerns are closely linked to the wider problem of teacher retention, but they are not reducible to it. Mentoring is a process that shapes how beginning teachers come to understand their work, their profession, and themselves within it. If we focus only on whether early career teachers stay, we risk overlooking the deeper question of whether they are being mentored in ways that support genuine flourishing — not just survival (Procter-Legg et al., 2025). This focus on flourishing reflects a growing international concern: the International Society for Teacher Education has adopted flourishing as the central theme of its 2026 conference, signalling a wider shift in how the field is thinking about the purposes of teacher preparation and early career support.

Japan offers a compelling point of comparison. Its approach to teacher education is rooted in a distinctive set of structural and cultural features — including limited school placements prior to qualification, a formalised and well-supported first-year induction programme overseen by prefectural Boards of Education, and a professional culture in which collaborative mentoring practices are embedded from the outset (Ahn, 2016). Teacher retention and social status in Japan have historically been high, though the system faces its own contemporary challenges that resonate with concerns in England – including significant teacher workload and emerging recruitment challenges (OECD, 2025). Investigating how Japanese universities, schools and prefectural administration approach the preparation and early support of secondary teachers within a different cultural and institutional context could offer valuable perspectives for English teacher education — not as a model to transplant, but as a lens through which to examine our own assumptions and practices.

Purpose and scope

Tokyo Gakugei University is designated by Japan's Ministry of Education as a flagship university for teacher education and is the ideal setting to investigate the how Japanese universities prepare secondary teachers for sustained professional flourishing. I am proposing a ten-day visit to Tokyo in July 2026 to develop a grounded, first-hand understanding of how secondary teacher education operates in Japan, with a particular focus on how student and beginner teachers are mentored and supported. While exploratory at this stage, the intention is that this visit will lay the groundwork for a longer-term collaborative research project into student teacher flourishing.

My principal collaborator for this project is Dr Hiroki Suematsu – an associate professor at Tokyo Gakugei University, alongside Prof. Shigeki Izawa at Nagoya University and Dr Kemma Tsujino at Osaka Metropolitan University. We have already had four online meetings to discuss the logistics around the development of the project and ways we might develop a future research relationship. Together, they have expressed their support for us to:

- Explore the role universities play in Japanese teacher education, with a focus on the development and training of mentors
- Examine how beginner teachers in Japan are mentored during their first years of practice, with a focus on the development of professional identity and purpose
- Investigate how professional flourishing is conceptualised within the Japanese system, and what English teacher education might learn from a comparative perspective.

While visiting Japan, I will work with my collaborators to identify opportunities for knowledge exchange with colleagues and students and collaborative research projects. I will also extend the invitation for colleagues to visit Liverpool John Moores University and involve other nearby ITE institutions.

How the scholarship would be used

The scholarship would be used in the following ways, totalling £2,988:

- Fund a return flight from London to Tokyo - £1,800
- Fund return travel from Liverpool to London (for flight to Tokyo) - £100
- Fund an overnight stay in London (for flight to Tokyo) - £180
- Fund a pass for local travel in Japan - £394
- Fund two nights in Nagoya - £257
- Fund two nights in Osaka – £257

I have secured in-kind accommodation for the duration of the project in Tokyo through connections living in the city. My principal collaborator has also offered to provide any translation and interpretation necessary.

The scholarship would enable an investigation that cannot be replicated through desk-based research or online exchange alone — being present in schools, observing practice, and engaging in extended face-to-face dialogue with teacher educators add to the richness of this investigation and professional exchange.

Anticipated outcomes and dissemination

On returning, I will submit a reflective report to UCET for publication on the website and would welcome the opportunity to present my findings at the UCET annual conference. More broadly, I anticipate that this visit will produce several outcomes:

- Practical insights into mentoring approaches that could inform the development of secondary teacher education at Liverpool John Moores University and beyond.
- Joint publications and future funding applications exploring mentoring for professional flourishing in the UK and Japan.
- Strengthened connections between UK and Japanese teacher education communities, contributing to a wider international dialogue in the field.

The timing of the visit — before the end of the Japanese school semester around 20 July — has been carefully planned with my host to maximise opportunities for school-based observation and engagement with practising teachers and student teachers during the academic year.

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