

INITIAL TEACHER/HIGHER EDUCATION INSPECTION

Bachelor of Education Honours Degree
Programmes in primary and post-primary
education

St Mary's University College,
Belfast

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Providing Inspection services for:
Department of Education
Department for the Economy
and other commissioning Departments



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Context of the Bachelor of Education Honours Programmes in primary and post-primary education

St Mary's University College dates back to 1900 when the Dominican Sisters opened St Mary's Training College. The mission of the College is *'of service and excellence, in the Catholic tradition, to higher education in Northern Ireland'* and it aims to *'develop the whole person in a Christian values-centred environment in preparation for a lifetime of learning, leadership and service'*.

Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) has been the awarding body for the College since 1968, and conducts a range of procedures to ensure quality assurance and high academic standards. In 1999, St Mary's College became a University College of QUB.

The College offers two Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) Honours degree programmes, aspects of which, such as education studies and personal and professional learning, are provided in a unitary manner. On the successful completion of the course, the students are awarded an honours degree and are recognised as qualified to teach by the General Teaching Council, Northern Ireland (GTCNI).

The **post-primary B. Ed.** comprises four main subject-based options. Main subject teaching is provided in business studies, mathematics and science, religious studies and technology and design. In the mathematics and science option, mathematics is the main subject and science is provided as a subsidiary. Students choosing business studies, religious studies and technology and design take a subsidiary subject from English, history, ICT or science. In the post-primary programme key skills modules, provision is made for Learning for Life and Work as well as literacy, numeracy and using Information and Communications Technology.

In the **B. Ed. primary** programme, students choose a subject from a choice of eight options: English, history, Irish, mathematics, music, physical education, religious studies or science. Curriculum Studies modules cover World Around Us, physical education, personal development and mutual understanding, and creative and expressive studies. Key skills modules in the primary programme cover literacy, numeracy and using Information and Communications Technology.

At the core of both programmes, professional development modules prepare for and assess the students through the progressive development of formative profiling for a total school teaching experience of thirty-six weeks over the four years of the programme.

Education Studies modules (providing philosophical, historical, psychological and sociological perspective on children schools and the community) and special education needs is one of several cross-programme themes common to both programmes.

Applications for places on the B. Ed. programmes are very significantly over-subscribed with 1073 primary and 358 post-primary applications in 2019. The enrolment quotas for the B. Ed. programmes are determined by Department of Education (DE) with 95 primary places and 50 post-primary places available annually.

Entry requirements have remained steady for the primary B. Ed. over recent years. In terms of UCAS tariff points the average for the post-primary programme has decreased overall and most notably for technology and design which is twenty points lower than for the other main subject choices. ([UCAS tariff points](#) translate examination grades into a numerical score for the purpose of entry to university courses.)

Focus of the inspection

The inspection was conducted in the terms of the *DE Circular [2010/03 Initial Teacher Education: Approval of Programmes](#)* which sets out the requirements which programmes must meet to be accredited by the GTCNI and approved by DE. The circular requires that the provision is judged by the ETI to be at least satisfactory.

In order to promote improvement in the interest of all students the inspection set out to evaluate:

- the quality of the provision and the outcomes for the students; and
- the University College's leadership and management and its capacity to effect and sustain improvement in its provision and standards.

Furthermore, the inspectors considered how well three broad themes, which reflect DE policy priorities for schools, are represented in the initial preparation of teachers:

- the extent of the students' understanding of the overarching aims, values and purposes of the Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) and their preparation to translate their understanding into practice in schools;
- the extent to which the students recognise, understand and respond to a wide range of individual difference amongst learners in schools; and
- how well the students are being developed to take an evaluative and critical approach to teaching, assessment and learning.

Thirty-six inspection visits to schools were conducted to evaluate the teaching of student teachers and the effectiveness of the support provided to them by College staff and host schools. The visits allowed for discussions with teacher-tutors, teachers, heads of (post-primary) subject departments and senior leaders in schools. Inspectors also reviewed the students' teaching experience folders and talked to them about their progress.

From 23rd March 2020, College campuses were closed to students, due to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. The campuses remained closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 academic year and online teaching of the students commenced remotely.

Through the College's two online teaching and learning environments inspectors were able to scrutinise a wide range of strategy, procedural and planning documents, course handbooks, programme and module specifications and content, teaching resources, evaluation reports, external examiners' reports and a small sample of student coursework and assignments.

It became clear, due to the likely continuing impacts of the pandemic, that it would not be feasible to postpone the intended campus inspection visits, which were due to take place in April 2020, into the 2020-2021 academic year and therefore not possible to undertake first-hand inspection of the teaching provision and the learning on campus. It was agreed, rather than to leave the approvals process in abeyance, to publish a report based on the evidence available, despite its limitations, to enable the process to proceed and avoid the risk of the B. Ed. programmes lacking continued GTCNI accreditation and DE approval.

However, the evidence available allows a range of strengths to be identified and a number of improvement questions for the College leadership to consider, review and to act upon in terms of the alignment of the B. Ed. curriculum with NIC requirements and the preparation of the students as beginning teachers.

As many of the findings and emerging conclusions evaluated are common to both the primary and the post-primary B. Ed. programmes they are reported in a generic way in the following report, except where explicitly referenced below.

Overall findings of the inspection of the B. Ed. Programmes

Outcomes for learners

The effective design of the B. Ed. programmes aims to develop the students' knowledge and critical appraisal of the NIC. Both programmes set out to help the students to understand initially, and then to address, the range of teaching challenges in schools. There is a growing emphasis on appreciating the increasing diversity of learners in schools and being prepared to be inclusive in their approach to teaching.

Throughout the programmes, a focus is placed on the students' development as teachers and the transition from a more directed school pedagogy to learning in a self-directed, engaged manner as well as developing their understanding of the role of education in establishing social justice for the disadvantaged learner. The induction and "stepping stones" elements in the programmes support the transition of the students from school to college life.

Programme design helps in realising the College's mission for the students and aligns well with DE's strategic priorities and the professional values in the GTCNI's teacher [competency framework](#) and the [Learning Leaders strategy](#) is influential in the design and provision of the B. Ed. programmes.

Retention through both B. Ed. programmes is very good, with high academic standards evinced by most students attaining first class honours or second class honours upper division degree classifications, consistently year-on-year and with professional competence evident in their files, coursework and assignments. Samples of students' final year capstone projects demonstrate high standards of academic rigour, are of a high calibre and increasingly reach Master's level.

Overall, the student teachers are prepared well for their school-based work, modelling their teaching on their host teacher and developing their skills in response to the feedback received from their college tutors and staff in the host schools.

In the school-based experience inspected, most of the lessons taught by the students were good or better, with a significant minority very good or better, and with indicators of improvement as they progress through the four-year programme.

Almost all of the students are making very good progress measured against the General Teaching Council's (GTCNI) teacher competency framework as well as developing their capacity to reflect critically on their own practice. In the most effective practice, relationships between the student teachers and learners is positive and supportive. The students are developing well their planning, teaching and self-evaluation. They benefit to good effect from applying their teaching skills and learning in different primary and post primary key stage contexts.

A small minority of primary student teachers over-direct learning activities, lose focus on the success criteria and do not provide enough opportunities for practical work. In a minority of post-primary cases planning too much lesson content leads to directing the pupils to complete low-level activities, causing loss of attention and reducing challenge. In both phases, there is a continuing need to prompt students to model the correct use of grammar when addressing the class.

As a result of a strategic approach taken across the College to develop digital learning knowledge and skills, the use of ICT as a pedagogic resource is consistently well developed; in their teaching the students use appropriate, quality resources to support learning, including good, creative uses of ICT.

Overall there is very good academic and pastoral support from college tutors who know their students well, understand their needs and are appropriately supportive and challenging.

Quality of provision

The programme modules are designed to ensure that students make good progress, measured against the General Teaching Council's (GTCNI) teacher competency framework as well as developing their capacity to reflect with criticality on their own practice and on the school curriculum. The students benefit from opportunities to investigate the role of learning leaders in their particular subject.

The structure of both programmes has a coherent, developmental, progressive structure over the four years (through the stages of developing a professional foundation, developing specialism and developing leadership capacity) all underpinned by the distinctive values and philosophy of Catholic education and facilitating a well-planned range of learning experiences to develop incrementally the student's skills acquisition and knowledge development.

Together, the Education Studies, Key Skills and Curriculum Studies modules, as well as the subject application of subject modules enable the College to be highly responsive to contemporary challenges in schools and ensure that both programmes address very well the broader educational themes which the DE highlights as policy priorities in schools.

One of the most significant elements of both B Ed degrees is the work the students undertake in their final year capstone studies. Through investigative projects, linked directly to contemporary schooling and effective learning strategies, the students engage in scholarly research and are challenged to connect theory with practice.

Within the modules, well-planned activities are designed to lead the students to reflect on and direct their own learning through small group, one-to-one support, academic assignments and practical activities and workshops. The Learning Leaders strategy is influencing the design and provision of the B Ed programmes laying the foundation and developing lifelong skills for reflective practice, self-determined professional learning and collegiality.

Given the challenge of supporting learners with special needs, special education is given close attention in both programmes in a planned and progressive way. As reported in Chief Inspector's reports [2014-2016](#) and [2016-2018](#) and with the pending implementation of [SEND legislation](#), teachers face a growing challenge in how best to respond to learners with special needs in the classroom. College leaders could consider providing the students with practical teaching advice earlier on in the B. Ed. programmes.

Primary provision

The important attention paid to action research across the years, and in many of the elements of the primary B. Ed. degree, provides opportunities for the students to practise their skills in selecting appropriate methodologies to measure children's progress in learning. Through well-planned, practical and interactive sessions, the students gather and interrogate first-hand evidence to inform effectively their planning for school-based work. As a result the students improve their appreciation and understanding of the barriers to children's learning and plan with increasing effectiveness to meet a diverse range of need.

Through active engagement in the professional development and school experience modules the students gain a range of important skills including: critical thinking, information and communication, organisational and working collaboratively in a team. The students prepare well for the opportunities to engage with co-ordinators in meaningful conversations focused on the challenges and opportunities involved in their roles. Through their improvement process, College leaders could evaluate how the students prepare to measure the readiness of children to transition effectively through each key stage of learning.

The primary programme focuses appropriately on deepening the students' understanding of children's literacy and numeracy development and thus reflects well DE's Count, [Read: Succeed](#) strategy. College leaders could consider how to balance literacy and numeracy work with other areas of learning in the primary curriculum, allowing further opportunities for students to consider how a broad and balanced primary curriculum supports the aims of DE's policy [Every School a Good School](#).

Post-primary provision

The structure of the post primary programme delivers a well-planned range of learning experiences to develop incrementally the student's skills acquisition and knowledge development.

The post-primary B. Ed. curriculum is designed for students to enrol in a main post-primary specialism over the four years of the programme and to study, over two years of the programme, a subsidiary subject to broaden employment opportunities. The design intention is to prepare the student to teach the subsidiary subject to key stage 3, and in some cases to key stage 4, but not beyond.

Evaluated against the ability to teach the main subject specialism to post-16 level (for an Advanced Level, or a Level 3 vocational qualification) the curriculum design for business studies, mathematics, religious studies and technology and design, together with evidence from a sample of student coursework and assignments, indicates an appropriate reflection of the curriculum expectation in schools for teaching at that level. It is appropriate that the College is reviewing the curriculum content for mathematics to reintroduce mechanics in order to reflect better the GCSE further maths and GCE Advanced level mathematics examination specifications.

Furthermore, there are changing enrolment patterns over recent years for the main subject specialisms, with lower entrance requirements in technology and design, but with a low enrolment in mathematics and science which is challenging for the viability of the provision.

Also, higher education employment destination data is not sufficiently fine-grained to provide a source of evidence about the ultimate employment of the graduates to teach subjects at a specific level in schools and therefore does not yield the information which College leaders would need to assess the specific employment outcomes of the different subject choices made by the students.

Leadership and management

There is an emphasis on sustaining a strong culture of reflection, evaluation and continuous improvement in the College. The College leaders are open to quality improvement and are responsive to internal and external evaluation reports and recommendations to inform change and improve the student experience.

The B. Ed. Programmes, and the modules which comprise the programme, are subject to a significant range of regulatory, evaluation, improvement and quality review and enhancement processes, both internal and external.

There is first-hand evidence of the beneficial impact of external measures of effectiveness by, for example, the [QAA](#), the QUB and a range of external examiners. The College leadership applies the ETI Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework as an additional element to inform its improvement process. Internally, the College is attentive to the student voice, both formally and informally, gathering student feedback across the College.

A recently-developed virtual learning environment provides a clear structure to the coherence of the curriculum and supports learning, teaching and assessment across both B Ed programmes through a number of online tools. Following the closure of the campus for teaching, and supported by relevant staff development earlier in the year, the academic staff enhanced and extended promptly their existing online module resources by providing live (synchronous) interactive teaching lessons for the students, including lectures, seminars, discussion groups and one-to-one tuition.

A detailed staff development strategy dovetails with the learning and teaching strategy, supports research activity, and sets out to enable staff to achieve, in their practice, the College's goals and to keep abreast of contemporary aspects of teacher professionalism.

While it was not possible to evaluate the care and welfare support services provided by the College for the students on campus, evidence from the inspection of the school-based work reveals strong pastoral support for the students. The supportive roles played by the writing centre and numeracy support hub confirm the positive evaluation of the consistent standard of student care alluded to through the student exit survey.

Overall findings on the Primary and Post-primary B. Ed. programmes

Where inspection evidence is available, the College has important strengths in its provision and the standards of the students' school teaching is mostly good and better.

The inspection team was able to identify and report to College leaders a number of emerging issues which they have both commitment and capacity to act upon in terms of the alignment of the B. Ed. curriculum with NIC requirements and the preparation of the students as beginning teachers.

This report of the findings of the inspection, with the limitations caused by the context of the coronavirus pandemic, enables the approvals and accreditation process to proceed in a timely manner.

Appendix: Reporting terms used by the Education and Training Inspectorate

Quantitative terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

Performance levels

The ETI use the following performance levels when reporting on outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management (and the overall provision in a subject area or unit, as applicable):

Outstanding
Very good
Good
Important area(s) for improvement
Requires significant improvement
Requires urgent improvement

The ETI use the following levels when reporting on care and welfare:

Impacts positively on learning, teaching and outcomes for learners
Does not impact positively enough on learning, teaching and outcomes for learners

Overall effectiveness

The ETI use one of the following inspection outcomes when evaluating the overall effectiveness of the school:

The school has a high level of capacity for sustained improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.

The school demonstrates the capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor how the school sustains improvement.

The school needs to address (an) important area(s) for improvement in the interest of all the learners. The ETI will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the area(s) for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.

The school needs to address urgently the significant areas for improvement identified in the interest of all the learners. It requires external support to do so. The ETI will monitor and report on the school's progress in addressing the areas for improvement. There will be a formal follow-up inspection.

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