National College for
Teaching & Leadership

Effective Improvement Planning in Initial Teacher Training

July 2013

Contents

1. Context

1. Two key documents emphasise the significance of effective planning for improvement: the Ofsted 'Initial Teacher Education (ITE) inspection handbook (June 2012)'; and the 'Initial teacher training (ITT) criteria'.

2. The Ofsted 'ITE inspection handbook' stresses that, in judging the leadership and management of any partnership[1], inspectors will:

   ▪ take close account of how far the partnership is focused on improving, or sustaining, the quality of provision and trainee outcomes (e.g. paragraphs 107, 108, 109);

   ▪ examine how well the partnership is implementing well-focused improvement plans[2] based on robust and perceptive self-evaluation (paragraph 109);

   ▪ expect self-evaluation, and thus planning for improvement, to be based on a thorough analysis of trainee outcomes (paragraph 109); and

   ▪ look for evidence of demonstrable capacity to bring about further improvement (paragraphs 107, 109).

3. Robust self-evaluation and improvement planning are interdependent. A partnership undertaking rigorous self-evaluation will:

   ▪ use outcomes data to evaluate the effectiveness of its improvement actions in tackling the priorities listed in its previous year's self-evaluation; and

   ▪ identify the key priorities for improvement which will focus improvement planning for the following year.

4. The ITT criteria set out, as a requirement (C3.4), the close link between effective self-evaluation (determined through monitoring, evaluation and moderation) and securing improvement.

---

[1] This paper uses the term "partnership" to refer to every type of ITT provider. All partnerships have to ensure that every trainee has taught in at least two schools ("Initial teacher training criteria" C2.5; the term school is defined in footnote 7 of the "Initial teacher training criteria").

[2] Partnerships employ different terms to describe the documents which capture their planning for improvement. This paper uses the term improvement plan for documents capturing annual improvement planning.

2. Compiling improvement plans

2.1 Long, medium and short term planning

5. In undertaking annual improvement planning, partnerships should take full account of three levels of planning i.e.:

   ▪ strategic planning which tackles developments over the longer term i.e. three to five years;

   ▪ annual improvement planning which deals with development priorities arising from annual self-evaluation and from any aspects of strategic planning scheduled for that particular year (see paragraph 20); and

   ▪ action planning for any actions in the annual improvement plan that need to be broken down into an additional detailed sequence of activities (see paragraph 26).

2.2 Partnership-wide planning

6. Government policy emphasises the need for ITT to be school-led. The Ofsted 'ITE inspection handbook' indicates that inspectors will examine how strongly schools are engaged in strategic leadership and management (see its paragraph 109). Thus, there is a clear expectation that all partner schools should play a significant role in both the self-evaluation and improvement planning processes. This role includes their involvement in identifying improvement priorities, compiling improvement plans and taking an active part in securing the necessary improvement.

7. One way of ensuring full partnership participation is for a small working group, representing all stakeholders, to compile drafts of improvement planning which are then circulated to all partners for comments. Comments could be focused by questions such as:

   ▪ How far does the plan tackle each key priority set out in the self-evaluation of the partnership?

   ▪ Do the actions address fully all the factors causing the weaknesses inherent in each priority?

   ▪ Is the costing of the actions realistic? Will partners have the resources necessary to play their part?

   ▪ Will the success criteria enable the partnership to judge the impact of actions on provision and outcomes?

- Does the plan make clear how and when reviews will take place to ensure that actions are kept on track and adjusted where they are not working well enough?

- Does the plan make clear what all partners need to do to contribute to improvement?

- Is the plan easy to follow? Are there any factual inaccuracies?

2.3 The layout of the plan

8. There is no agreed ideal format for improvement planning. Historical plans submitted to the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) suggest that any format can be effective if:

   - key features of effective improvement planning are in place (see Section 3 below);

   - the role of every partner is set out explicitly; and

   - the plan is concise, simple to follow and avoids unnecessary repetition.

9. The most common formats for improvement planning are:

   - a matrix style;

   - a continuous narrative style; or

   - a hybrid of the above two.

10. The visual nature of a matrix approach, with columns aligned horizontally and vertically, makes it easy to see the links between different elements of planning. Standard headings for columns in the matrix tend to be variants of: priorities; objectives; actions; success criteria; staff responsible; timescale; resource implications; monitoring; evaluation; and review.

11. However, the cell-like structure of a matrix format can restrict the amount of detail that can be included. For this reason, some partnerships prefer to produce a narrative account of planned improvements and how their effectiveness will be measured. This narrative approach allows providers to include more contextual information and gives an opportunity to show how some actions are designed to make an impact in several priority areas.

12. Increasingly, partnerships combine the narrative and matrix styles of presentation. For instance, there may be a narrative preface to the whole plan, and short narrative preface to each priority. Each priority is then addressed using a matrix format.

13. Whatever format is chosen, it is useful to provide a brief background introduction to the plan as a whole. This could include information, such as:

   - the reason for the choice of format, e.g. why it is appropriate for use in the particular situation;

   - how the plan has been compiled, including the contribution of all partners;

   - any distinctive features in the plan;

   - how the plan relates to any other action planning and to quality assurance arrangements; or

   - how the plan is tackling weaknesses identified by self-evaluation and inspection.

14. It is also useful to cross reference linked elements of the plan.

2.4 The improvement plan as a working document

15. An improvement plan is a working document to support the partnership in bringing about the changes necessary to ensure or sustain high quality provision and outcomes. Thus, it should be user friendly and easily accessible to all partners. It is vital that everyone understands its intentions and the part they should play in its implementation.

16. The plan should be refined and revised at regular points over the year as the partnership takes stock of its effectiveness to date (see paragraphs 39 and 44). The partnership can then check whether, or not, it is on track to secure the intended quality and outcomes and, where it is not, adjust planned actions accordingly.

17. Consequently, the plan should include space to note what each review shows about the impact on provision and outcomes, and should demonstrate adaptations where any planned action proves to be ineffectual or only partially effective (see paragraphs 16, 39 and 44). This is one reason why inspectors will use improvement plans to help them gauge the effectiveness of leadership and management in sustaining or improving not only the quality of provision but outcomes for trainees (see the Ofsted 'ITE inspection handbook', paragraph 25).

18. It is worth noting that, if reviews take place too early in the academic year, it is likely that there will be little evidence available to see, and show, the impact of actions on quality and outcomes. If reviews take place too late in the academic year, or only at its end, then it will be impossible to adjust actions to tackle remaining shortfalls or have evidence to show Ofsted.

19. Where plans are reviewed and updated regularly and frankly, they will demonstrate the relentless drive for improvement geared to impact on both quality and outcomes

which will be looked for during inspections (see the Ofsted 'ITE inspection handbook', paragraph 109).

3. Characteristics of effective improvement planning

3.1 Key priorities

20. Improvement planning is most effective when focused on a small number of key priorities in any one year. Mostly, these priorities will derive from the previous year's self-evaluation (see paragraphs 5 and 24) and external monitoring e.g. Ofsted report, external examiner reports etc. In addition, any priorities derived from long term strategic planning should also be addressed (see paragraph 5).

21. It is essential to unpack each priority in order to work out where exactly significant weaknesses lie. For instance, if a key priority is to tackle differences in attainment between trainees in different secondary subjects, the partnership needs to know in which particular standards or aspects of personal and professional conduct (See 'The *Teachers' Standards'* pages 6-9) such differences occur.

22. In identifying priorities, partnerships should give close attention to the causes of any shortfalls or improvements in trainee outcomes. This will enable planning to be focused sharply on those aspects of provision where changes will improve or sustain outcomes. (see paragraphs 24-26).

23. Once identified, priorities need to be set out simply and precisely to help focus the actions in the improvement plan and ensure that all partners have a clear understanding of its principal intentions.

3.2 Sequences of actions

24. In order to work out the actions required to address each priority, partnerships need to go back to their self-evaluation (see paragraph 22). Robust self-evaluation will have given attention to the reasons for the shortfalls and/or strengths identified by the analyses of outcomes and outcome trends. These evaluations should have led to the identification of priorities for inclusion in the improvement plan.

25. Thus, if a priority is to 'Address trainees' weakness in responding to the strengths and needs of all pupils', effective self-evaluation will have identified the reasons for this shortfall. These reasons could include: ineffectual tracking of trainee progress; lack of focused mentoring on this aspect of the standards; insufficient mentor training on how to address this aspect of the standards; weak planning instruments; or inadequate quality assurance of training in school. The actions in the plan should target each of these reasons.

26. To help them to develop sharply focused actions, some partnerships:

- in the case of each priority, set out each reason as a sub-priority or objective; and

- then, identify, for each objective, the sequence of cumulative 'bite-size" actions which need to be taken in order to achieve it. For instance, an objective such as "Extend mentor training" could be broken down into a series of highly specific sequential actions. Occasionally, as indicated in paragraph 5 above, partnerships set out such sequences of actions in additional action plans. Action plans may be particularly relevant when responding to new government policy priorities such as changes in training to teach early reading using systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) or primary mathematics.

27. In designing actions, a serious weakness to avoid is the use of vague generic verbs such as '*ensure'.* Such verbs merely denote aspirations. They give no indication as to how exactly the aspiration will be achieved. Thus, the reader is left asking the questions *'how will you do it?'* and *'how will you know your action made a difference?'*

3.3 Calendared actions

28. Indicating the date of each action in a staged chronological sequence is important.

29. Precise and systematic dating means that:

- every partner knows when every action in a sequence of actions should be undertaken;

- the partnership can check that the action has been implemented to time; and

- the partnership can align monitoring, evaluation and review arrangements appropriately.

3.4 Responsibilities

30. If an improvement plan is be implemented effectively, it should make clear:

- who has overall responsibility;

- who has responsibility for particular sequences of actions; and

- in the case of each action, who is responsible for ensuring that the action takes place.

31. The name and status/role of each person with responsibility should be included in the plan. Where a person and/or their status/role are identified by initials, a key should be provided.

32. It is essential that:

- the most appropriate person is identified for each responsibility i.e. that they have the necessary expertise, status and time; and

- responsibilities are distributed across the partnership and not allocated to the same one or two persons.

33. In some partnerships the key responsibilities of school partners are sometimes downplayed – or even omitted. This raises serious questions about the extent to which the partnership is actually school led.

3.5 Resource implications

34. Actions usually have resource implications. In the few cases where any action has no financial cost, this should be stated clearly.

35. In setting out resource implications, the partnership should avoid bland statements, such as *'time'*, *'travel costs'* or *'material costs'*. Instead, the plan should spell out costs in such a way that it is clear that close consideration has been given to specific resource needs. This approach to costing provides a better basis for justifying decisions about the use of resources and demonstrating the impact of resource allocations on outcomes. It also supports effective budgetary management.

3.6 Indicators of success

36. Success criteria should be seen as tools to help the partnership come to accurate judgements about the impact of actions on identified aspects of provision and outcomes. Such criteria need to be framed to allow that impact to be measured, observed or determined without ambiguity.

37. Examples of effective success criteria related to improving particular aspects of teaching early reading using SSP are:

- 90% of mentors set SSP–specific targets.

- When teaching early reading using SSP, 95% of trainees enunciate clearly compared to 80% in the previous year.

- 95% of trainees are confident that they can employ an unfamiliar phonics programme effectively.

38. Many partnerships struggle to identify effective success criteria. Common weaknesses include:

- the use of highly generalised and subjective language such as 'Mentors undertake their role effectively';

- merging several generalised and subjective criteria into one such as 'Mentors benefit from mentor training, set targets and support trainees well';

- omitting any meaningful quantifiable dimension such as 'Trainees benefit from strong mentoring'; and

- expressing success in terms of completed actions rather than impact such as 'All mentors attend training'.

39. Partnerships have found that their improvement trajectory is enhanced by the use of appropriately staged success criteria at formal review points. This approach is most effective where the improvement plan sets out chronological sequences of actions aligned with these review points. Success criteria can then be employed at each review to enable the partnership to judge how far the planned actions are on track to achieve the intended high quality provision and outcomes. Where there are any shortfalls, the plan can be adjusted rapidly to secure the intended impact.

40. Two types of staged success criteria can support partnerships in judging success over time: success criteria setting out the intended progressive impact of a sequence of actions on trainers and provision; and success criteria setting out the intended progressive impact of a series of actions on trainee outcomes.

41. When addressing a priority, partnerships may also include in their improvement plan a sequence of actions and aligned success criteria showing the intended impact of actions on trainers and the provision. Partnerships may consider creating success criteria which set out the intended progressive impact on the trainee outcomes of the sequence of actions.

3.7 Monitoring, evaluation and review

42. Improvement plans often fail to distinguish between the three different quality assurance processes of monitoring, evaluation and review. Some matrix plans even group these three processes under one column heading. Clearly there can be overlap, for instance visits from training managers can have both a monitoring and an evaluation function and use the same evidence to fulfil the two separate functions. However, improvement planning should give careful and separate attention to each process.

43. Improvement planning should show clearly:

- How, when and by whom sequences of actions will be monitored, and the evidence that will be used. The focus here is on checking that what is intended to happen is taking place when and how intended.

- How, when and by whom the effectiveness of sequences of actions will be judged, and the evidence that will be used. This enables the partnership to evaluate the impact of actions on quality and outcomes using documented success criteria.

- How, when and by whom the partnership will take stock (i.e. review) of the impact of actions in order to make any necessary adjustments to the improvement plan (see paragraphs 16 to 19 and 39). The evidence to inform reviews will come from the processes of monitoring and evaluation.

44. In each case, the partnership should be careful to:

- employ the full range of potential evidence, including the views of all stakeholders (See the Ofsted 'ITE inspection handbook' paragraph 109);

- make sure that the person or groups responsible for any of these three layers of quality assurance is different from the person or groups responsible for the relevant actions; and

- record the principal outcomes of regular reviews (see paragraphs 16 to 19 and 39). The record should indicate the date of the review, the impact of actions to date, and any necessary adjustments to improvement planning. It should not, as is too often the case, merely describe what has happened or focus on completion of actions.

45. The ITT criteria set out, as a requirement (C3.4), the close link between effective self-evaluation (determined through monitoring, evaluation and moderation) and securing improvement.

National College for
Teaching & Leadership