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To cite this article: Sabrina Fitzsimons & David S Smith (28 Jan 2025): *'Don't do anything special for us coming': the mental health impact of Ofsted inspections on teacher educators in England*, Cambridge Journal of Education, DOI: [10.1080/0305764X.2025.2451280](https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2025.2451280)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2025.2451280>



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Published online: 28 Jan 2025.



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'Don't do anything special for us coming': the mental health impact of Ofsted inspections on teacher educators in England

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ABSTRACT

Ofsted inspections of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers aim to enhance training quality for pre-service teachers in England. However, research rarely examines the impact of these inspections on the wellbeing of Teacher Educators (TEs) based in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This study, part of a broader investigation into burnout among HEI-based TEs in Ireland and the UK, focuses on the English context, where the inspection practices of Ofsted have been identified as significant stressors. Drawing on data from the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI), open-ended survey questions and interviews, this study provides preliminary insights into the mental health effects of Ofsted inspections on TEs. It reveals that inspection processes contribute to anticipatory stress, increased workload, and performative pressures, negatively impacting TEs' professional morale and wellbeing. The paper recommends reforms such as predictable inspection schedules, streamlined documentation, and dedicated mental health support for TEs during the inspection period.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 September 2024
Accepted 3 January 2025

KEYWORDS

Copenhagen Burnout Inventory; Ofsted; burnout; teacher educators; initial teacher education

Context and background

Initial Teacher Education

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) combines the integration of practical school-based experiences with the study of academic and pedagogical foundations. Currently, 179 ITE providers in England are accredited to offer training for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) (Department for Education, 2024a). Several ITE routes are available to meet demands for increased numbers of teachers within the profession and to encourage a more diverse teacher profile. These routes offer unique contributions to comprehensive teacher preparation. The most traditional route remains undergraduate or postgraduate programmes based in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that combine academic study with practical teaching experience. In comparison, School-Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) is led by groups of schools that provide immersive, hands-

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on training, usually in partnership with universities for the academic preparation component. Similarly, Teach First is a school-based programme that recruits high-achieving graduates to teach in disadvantaged communities. The trainee can earn a salary as they work towards QTS. The most recent route introduced in 2018 is the Postgraduate Teaching Apprenticeship (PGTA), a work-based salaried programme combining practical experience with academic study delivered in collaboration with HEIs. While it is outside the scope of this paper to examine the historical and policy context of ITE provision, Ellis (2023) offers a thorough examination of the topic. This study focuses on Teacher Educators (TEs) engaged in HEI-based ITE provision, which currently remains the dominant route towards QTS.

HEI-based Teacher Educators

In this paper, Teacher Educators (TEs) are conceptualised as HEI-based academics whose primary duties include preparing teachers across the education continuum. Many are described as second-career researchers and have significant school-based experience in classroom or leadership roles (Ellis et al., 2012). The role of the HEI-based TE is diverse and includes mentoring, supervising and supporting trainee teachers alongside traditional teaching, research and academic service duties. In many respects, TEs are conceptualised as ‘super-teachers’, with the expectation that they shall become super-researchers, often within research-driven universities (Ellis et al., 2013, n.p.). In addition, their work necessitates significant interpersonal skills, since they engage with HEI colleagues, PSTs, school-based teachers, mentors, leaders and a range of other university and professional groups.

Heretofore, studies have focused on the prevalence and factors contributing to stress among school-based teachers, with only a handful exploring the phenomena concerning HEI-based TE (for example, Coyle et al., 2020; Wood & Quickfall, 2024). Perhaps this is because the role of the TE is somewhat hidden and less clearly understood (McDonough et al., 2021). Others suggest that the academic fat-cat stereotype and associated media representations may contribute to silencing the discourse about TE mental health (Turner & Garvis, 2023). However, the limited research carried out has suggested that TEs have a low to moderate chance of burning out across a year for reasons similar to those evident within the broader teaching profession: work overload; university processes/procedures; work–life balance; role conflict; relational issues including conflict or isolation; and increased external compliance and accountability measures. These factors are intricately linked to the paradoxical role of the TE who wields influence, but has limited power (Reynolds, 1995). TEs often feel disempowered, with limited autonomy in decision-making within the HEI (Tuinamuana, 2016).

For example, in their study of burnout among TEs in New York State, Coyle et al. (2020) highlighted mandated curricula, accreditation processes and changing educational policies as central to ‘sucking the joy out of teacher education’ (p. 73). TEs are subject to external evaluations that dictate the standards they must meet, often without the agency to enact significant changes. Moreover, they may be compelled by external forces to implement practices that contradict their professional values and understanding of quality teacher education (Coyle et al., 2020; Wood & Quickfall, 2024). More practically, the workload associated with teaching and the attendant elements to be ‘inspected’

are often not appropriately recognised within workload models, which has unintended implications for career progression. This oversight demonstrates the value placed on the expert practitioner vs research skills of the TE. Reynolds (1995) argues that the combination of these factors exacerbates the low professional self-esteem that some TEs experience within a research-driven HEI. This is significant, since their wellbeing may ultimately influence the quality of teacher preparation.

Ofsted inspection of Initial Teacher Education providers

The duty of care to pupils in the classroom depends on maintaining high standards in teacher education. This is a significant outcome of the collaborative effort of all involved in ITE, including ITE providers, TEs and funding and inspection bodies. As indicated earlier, although the sources of ITE provision have broadened in recent years, most ITE providers in England are situated within HEIs, such as colleges or institutes of education, often within a university setting. As a statutory requirement, all teacher education programmes in England – including those of early childhood, primary, secondary and further education providers – are subject to inspection by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted). The stated purpose of inspections is public accountability and quality assurance, that is, to ensure ITE providers meet common set standards and comply with relevant legislation.

Ofsted inspection process

Ofsted inspections of ITE providers in England are guided by the *Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Inspection Framework and Handbook* (Ofsted, 2022). Typically, the inspection process involves five stages. First, the ITE provider receives notification of the inspection three working days before the inspection date. By 9 am the following day, the ITE programme leader must provide the inspectorate with timetables, staff lists, trainee data, information about placement settings, an overview of programmes offered, the ITE curriculum and ITE handbooks, among other data (Ofsted, 2024). Stage two of the process involves the review of the pre-inspection documentation and a preparatory phone call with the ITE leader. Next, the on-site inspection takes place, ranging from two to five days’ duration, dependent upon the number of programmes to be inspected and the location of partnerships. The on-site visit is comprehensive, involving observation of teaching practice; interviews with pre-service teachers, mentors and leadership teams; reviewing trainee work and assessment records; and evaluation of curricular provision. Following the on-site inspection process, oral feedback is provided, with emphasis on strengths and areas in need of improvement. Finally, the inspection outcome is published, offering an evaluation on the quality of education and training as well as the leadership and management of the partnership (Ofsted, 2024). The judgement or grading culminates in a one-word rating: outstanding; good; requires improvement; inadequate; or not yet graded.

Across the academic year 2022/2023, Ofsted inspected 77 ITE providers, covering 108 teacher-training programmes from early childhood to further education. Of that figure, the majority received a ‘good’ report card (66), while 33 received an ‘outstanding’ judgement; the remaining number (4) received ‘requires improvement’ and ‘inadequate’

(5) (Ofsted, 2023). We note, however, that at the time of writing some changes to school-based inspection processes have occurred, of most significance being the removal of one-word ratings (Department for Education, 2024b). In line with Ofsted's remit of public accountability, the final report is open access. In combination, the inspection process and outcome are designed to act as a 'force for improvement', a term used by Ofsted to describe the role of inspections in driving positive change in education. This function is consistent with statutory inspection processes in many contexts across Europe (MacNab, 2004).

High-stakes nature of Ofsted inspections

Importantly, less favourable reports can negatively impact the ITE provider's reputation and standing. By way of illustration, a negative outcome may impact student recruitment numbers upon which HEIs are reliant for funding. It may also have implications for graduates seeking employment. More broadly, a negative Ofsted outcome can have detrimental effects on ITE providers in terms of attracting research funding and, indeed, the retention and attraction of high-quality TEs. Ultimately, ITE providers who receive consecutive judgements below 'good' can face withdrawal of programme accreditation, potentially resulting in funding withdrawal and programme closure (Department for Education, 2023c). In such ways, the high-stakes nature of inspections for TEs and ITE providers in England becomes apparent. It is worth noting here that a 'good' report from Ofsted does not guarantee reaccreditation for ITE providers (Cameron, 2022). Reaccreditation occurs under another DfE inspection framework, emphasising the 'watched' and prescriptive nature of ITE in England (Gavin & McGrath-Champ, 2024).

What is known about Teacher Educator wellbeing and Ofsted inspections of ITE?

There is very limited literature on the impact of Ofsted inspection processes on the wellbeing of TEs in England. However, a substantial longitudinal body of data has consistently documented its adverse effects on school-based teachers and head teachers. We draw insights from these studies, as they may reveal similar challenges for HEI-based TEs. For example, the Teacher Wellbeing Index Report 2023 (Education Support, 2023) found that 73% of participants (from a total sample size of over 2500 teachers in England) reported that Ofsted inspections negatively impact their mental health and wellbeing, resulting in increased stress and strain on the teacher–student relationship (Beyond Ofsted Inquiry, 2023; Ehren et al., 2016; Perryman, 2007; Sen & Nicholson, 2023). Other reports confirm that the Ofsted inspection process can reinforce negative self-perceptions among teachers regarding their professional competence. The associated stress can become an emotional contagion affecting the workplace environment, leading to stress-related absenteeism that burdens colleagues (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996; Jerrim et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2023). Many reports describe the Ofsted inspection culture as toxic (Richards & Norris, 2024), hence it is no surprise that a recent Department for Education (2023a) report on the working lives of teachers and school leaders, and a National Education Union poll (2023), identified inspections as a significant causal factor in teachers' deciding to leave the profession. More worryingly, teacher stress

related to the Ofsted inspection process has been linked to suicidality (Perryman et al., 2023; Waters & Palmer, 2023). The data on teacher wellbeing are of interest too, since they demonstrate a consistent pattern, across a range of data sources, in which the Ofsted inspection process can have negative consequences for mental health and wellbeing. Additionally, the Big Listen report (Ofsted, 2024) supports and extends these findings to TEs, providing evidence of parallels with school-based teachers' experiences. For example, the report acknowledges that the inspection process has generated a culture of fear and negatively impacted staff wellbeing across all education sectors, including ITE (Ofsted, 2024). To illustrate the impact, the School of Education at the University of Exeter reported several concerns to Parliament in their assessment of the impact of Ofsted ITE inspections on the workload and subsequent wellbeing of TEs and school-based partners. Specifically, they reported that an additional 864 hours of work were required during the inspection period, including 90 hours of scheduled meetings and the uploading of 430 documents to the inspectorate. The report highlights many factors that contributed to the poor wellbeing of staff during the inspection period, including a lack of inspector expertise, which necessitated additional explanatory documentation. Changes to scheduling during the inspection period created extra work and stress for the ITE provider and partner schools. The report also highlights high levels of stress during the process, with some participants referring to the Ofsted culture as 'brutal', 'inhumane' and 'dehumanising' (University of Exeter School of Education, 2023, n.p.).

The response of the University Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) to the Big Listen consultation (Universities Council for the Education of Teachers, 2024) further expands these findings. Its report indicates a mixed but largely critical perspective on the Ofsted ITE inspection process. Many respondents indicated that their workload increased during the inspection period and described the process as stressful, while others claimed it engendered a sense of mistrust. The report acknowledges that some providers found the inspection process to be 'inquisitorial' in nature, arguing that it added undue pressure to the wellbeing of ITE staff. The UCET response also highlights the anticipatory stress that inspections generated, and argues for 'clearer indications of the weeks in which Ofsted might potentially visit', as this 'would help providers to plan, and allow staff to book annual leave, with consequent benefits in regards mental health and wellbeing' (n.p.). While it is true that providers had varied experiences, the response from UCET to the Big Listen consultation suggests that the ITE Ofsted inspection process is structured in such a way that creates unnecessary anxiety, which impacts the wellbeing of some TEs. A recent study of TEs in England further implies that the inspection process and underpinning government policy add undue pressure and demands to TEs and an already stretched ITE sector (Wood & Quickfall, 2024).

The limited research on this topic supports the assertion that the impact of Ofsted inspections on TEs mirrors that of school-based teachers in a number of ways, including the intense demands ultimately impacting professional and personal wellbeing. However, further studies are needed to better understand the challenges faced by TEs within the Ofsted inspection framework, as they may continue for some time. As a body accountable to the public, Ofsted (2024) has indicated its intent to continue the scrutiny of ITE providers to ensure high standards of evidence-based, high-quality teacher education, with particular emphasis on teachers' ability to work with students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and on safeguarding.

Research objectives

The present study builds upon research conducted in Ireland and the UK, which found that external processes such as accreditation and inspections contribute to burnout among HEI-based TEs (Wood & Quickfall, 2024). By drawing on survey and interview data, this research specifically examines the impact of Ofsted inspections on the psychological wellbeing of TEs in England. The objective is to understand and explain how inspections may contribute to stress, burnout and poor mental health within this group, focusing on uncertainty as a driving factor. Furthermore, we aim to extend the discussion by demonstrating that the negative side effects of the Ofsted inspection process also permeate higher education sectors, underscoring the need for systemic reform to protect the mental health of educators across all levels. Thus, we aim to shed light on how inspections, such as those carried out by Ofsted, can impact the wellbeing of the HEI-based TEs. Two research questions guide the study:

RQ1. Is burnout prevalent among HEI-based Teacher Educators in England?

RQ2: How does the Ofsted inspection process contribute to stress and burnout among HEI-based Teacher Educators in England?

Methods

The findings from this paper are part of a larger investigation into variables contributing to burnout in HEI-based TEs in Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK). While the broader study includes data from Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, this sample specifically includes data collected from respondents from England because the inspection practices of Ofsted are i) unique to England and ii) have been identified as factors that influence the mental health of TEs (Wood & Quickfall, 2024). Focusing on the English context allows the authors to provide a more context-specific understanding of how externally mandated inspections contribute to poor mental health among TEs. Participants responding to the survey were also invited for a follow-up interview to explore their experiences in greater depth.

Recruitment and participants

TEs working in HEI-based accredited ITE programmes across Ireland and the UK were invited via email to participate in this study. The email, shared with over 1500 TEs, included an outline of the purpose of the study and a link to the JISC survey page, which directed participants to the plain language statement, informed consent and questionnaire. One-hundred-and-fifty-four participants completed the survey. Of these, 36 (23.7%) were based in England. Five participants from England participated in a follow-up interview, offering representation from three of the four ITE sectors (primary, secondary, further education), gender and age. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online and allowed for further exploration of the open-ended survey questions. While we had hoped for a larger sample size, we are cognisant that sensitive topics

dealing with mental health and wellbeing may influence participants' availability and willingness to share personal experiences. Other recent studies on mental health in higher education have reported similar concerns (Smith et al., 2022). Yet we argue the interview sample meets the *guidelines* for small-scale thematic analysis projects (Braun et al., 2016). The participant profile in the combined data set also represents key demographics, providing a meaningful cross section of experiences across the early childhood, primary, secondary and further education TE sectors. Thus, they grant us a general snapshot of TEs' attitudes and provide additional insights into them.

Participants in this sample were 64% female ($n = 23$), 33% male ($n = 12$) and 3% non-binary ($n = 1$). This gender distribution reflects the broader trends in the education sector, where women are often overrepresented, particularly in teaching roles. Participants ranged from 25 to 65 years, with 11% aged 25–35 years ($n = 4$), 28% aged 36–45 years ($n = 10$), 31% aged 46–55 years ($n = 11$) and 31% aged 56–65 years ($n = 11$). This distribution initially suggests a balanced representation of early-career and more experienced TEs; however, the authors note that teacher education is often pursued as a second career, meaning the age distribution may only partially correspond to career stages. However, the role demographics confirm that the majority of participants are in mid to senior academic TE positions, with 22% identified as Assistant Professors (Lecturers), 58% as Associate Professors (Senior Lecturers), 8% as Professors and smaller percentages in other roles, such as Teacher Fellows (3%) and unspecified roles (8%). Regarding years of experience in their current roles, the data revealed that 42% of participants had 5–10 years of experience ($n = 15$), followed by 28% with 1–4 years of experience ($n = 10$), 14% with over 20 years of experience ($n = 5$), 11% with 11–15 years of experience ($n = 4$), and 6% with 16–20 years of experience ($n = 2$).

Measurement

In the first phase of data collection, the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) was employed to assess fatigue, exhaustion and the attribution of these factors to specific domains/spheres in participants' lives (Kristensen et al., 2005). The open-access CBI inventory comprises three subscales for differentiation: Personal Burnout; Work-Related Burnout; and Client-Related Burnout. The scales employed in the CBI have demonstrated good validity and reliability for assessing burnout across various professional contexts in different cultures and across several languages (Kristensen et al., 2005; Barton et al., 2022). The Personal Burnout scale assesses psychological and physical fatigue and exhaustion experienced by an individual. The second scale, addressing Work-Related Burnout, gauges psychological and physical fatigue and exhaustion related to one's job. The final scale, Student-Related Burnout, directly assesses psychological and physical fatigue and exhaustion related to working with people (Milfont et al., 2007). The response categories are presented in a five-point Likert scale. Twelve items on the scale range across always (100), often (75), sometimes (50), seldom (25) and never/almost never (0), while seven items range from 'to a very high degree' (100) to 'a very low degree' (0). Scores from 0 to 49 are considered low, 50–74 moderate and 75+ high on the burnout scale. Within this study, the CBI self-report survey included demographic questions including age, gender, country of

origin, role, ITE sector, length of time teaching within ITE and marital status. To explore the topic in greater depth, the survey ended with open-ended questions based on the definition of each section of the scale. As such, the adapted CBI measure allowed for the measurement of burnout as a continuous variable with a range of scores, while the open-ended survey questions allowed for a detailed description of factors contributing to TE burnout to emerge. The additional layer of semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to explore emerging patterns in further detail.

Data analysis

SPSS software was used to support the analysis of the CBI data, which focused exclusively on HEI-based TEs from England. The qualitative data, which pertain specifically to the impact of Ofsted inspections on TEs in England, were managed via NVivo. The researchers employed an inductive reflexive thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to analyse the open-ended survey questions and interview data responses that related to their experiences of Ofsted inspections. This process included data re-familiarisation, systematic open coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and developing themes, and refining and naming themes within an overall thematic framework specific to the English context and Ofsted inspection process.

Findings and discussion

Though limited in scope, the quantitative data provide interesting insights, particularly when viewed alongside the qualitative findings. Within this sample of HEI-based TE in England, the mean personal burnout was 58.58 ($SD = 18.14$), indicating moderate burnout. The mean work-related burnout was 52.37 ($SD = 20.99$), indicating moderate burnout, while student-related burnout was lower, at 31.01 ($SD = 24.88$), suggesting mild burnout. For comparative purposes, in the larger study the mean score for burnout of TEs in Ireland and the UK ($N = 154$) was: personal burnout ($M = 54.47$, $SD = 20.10$); work-related burnout ($M = 49.48$, $SD = 22.56$); and student-related burnout ($M = 30.23$, $SD = 23.05$). Note that the burnout scores for England were slightly higher across all three sub-dimensions than Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales. The CBI scores confirm the presence of burnout in TEs in England and suggest that TEs face a moderate risk of personal and work-related burnout. It is also interesting to note the lower student-related burnout score across the full sample. The observation tentatively suggests that the actual day-to-day work with PSTs is not the primary cause of burnout among TEs. However, due to our relatively small sample, we do not have enough participants to claim this is a microcosm of wider sector trends. Still, the results are useful for qualifying the more specific reflections on burnout, as it relates to OFSTED processes, which are explored below.

'You are on constant red alert'

Considering the high-stakes nature of Ofsted inspections, it is unsurprising that anticipatory stress and anxiety were present across participants. Though inspections of ITE programmes currently happen within a three-year cycle, the exact inspection date is not predictable: 'You don't even know what year they are going to come' (survey). Participants expressed how this uncertainty may contribute to ongoing vigilance: 'At the moment, we are expecting Ofsted, so that means every Wednesday between January to June, they might ring us' (interview). This state of 'constant anticipation' (survey) was frequently mentioned in the data, with many TEs highlighting the associated mental exhaustion. As one described it: 'It's the waiting around that is awful. You are on a knife edge' (interview). Several others expressed that the 'constant state of vigilance is exhausting; it's no wonder people decide to go off and get jobs elsewhere' (interview). The anticipatory stress linked to Ofsted assessments is noted in studies across the education sector (Perryman et al., 2023). Prior literature on the phenomenon argues that anticipating a significant event, particularly a negative one, can increase a person's preservative cognitions such as worry, anxiety or rumination, which may negatively impact their wellbeing (Brosschot et al., 2005; Kramer et al., 2022). For example, recent laboratory studies suggest that anticipating a directly evaluative event may be associated with psychobiological changes, including a rise in cardiovascular activity and stress reaction (Craw et al., 2021). Increased responses may also occur when an event is perceived as a potential threat to the social self, such as an evaluative event that may impact a person's self-esteem or standing within a community (Dickerson et al., 2009). Considering the uncertainty around timing coupled with the high-stakes nature of Ofsted inspections, it seems likely that the process could contribute to anticipatory stress among some TEs. As reported by one participant, 'the looming threat of an Ofsted inspection means we are in constant preparation mode while waiting for years for it to happen' (survey). Another summarised this state of anticipation as 'just plain wicked' (survey).

'Don't do anything special for us coming'

The limited studies on the wellbeing of HEI-based TEs generally align with the thesis that work overload contributes to burnout (Coyle et al., 2020; Wood & Quickfall, 2024). In the present study, participants had a distinct sense that preparation for and participation in Ofsted inspections may lead to work overload and individuals' perceived pressure of performativity and compliance. Participants reported that the need to prove their competence to inspectors intensifies the workload, resulting in a perceived unsustainable work-life balance: 'It almost doubles your workload because you are doing your job and making sure you can demonstrate you are doing the job as well' (interview). These pressures can result in 'super-long days' (interview). As one participant noted, there is pressure to document every aspect of their work 'so they won't close us down' (interview). Moreover, the focus on performativity appeared to detract from the work of teaching and mentoring: 'You have to have tunnel vision, get this done, get that done for Ofsted . . . to prove yourself' (survey). On top of this, participants described the actual inspection process as highly stressful: 'As soon as they ring, it's basically a nine-day "forget that you ever have a life" situation' (interview). This sentiment captures how the

performativity pressures associated with inspections can compel TEs to prioritise their professional obligations at the expense of their personal life: ‘Everything I plan in my life I have prefaced with “as long as Ofsted doesn’t ring”’ (interview).

Indeed, Clouston (2015) argues that performance orientation and intensification increase the risk of burnout. Although they are officially asked to work as they typically would, participants suggested that the unofficial expectation was they would go beyond this: ‘They say don’t do anything special for us coming . . . but the reality is I’m going to have to’ (interview). Like in the Wood and Quickfall (2024) study, participants associated the Ofsted inspection process with workload intensification: ‘Ofsted inspections mean more work pressure and increased workload’ (survey). More broadly, the data suggest that the high-pressure nature of inspections may influence TEs’ ability to fully engage with their day-to-day duties of teacher preparation, which participants commonly cited as the most rewarding part of their jobs. As one TE reported: ‘The teaching side is brilliant, the work with trainees is refreshing – it’s the administration associated with accreditation and Ofsted inspections that [is] causing burnout’ (survey).

‘You just wonder what it’s all for’

In line with prior research (Gardezi et al., 2023), participants indicated Ofsted inspections could negatively impact the professional identity and morale of TEs in England. Several participants expressed disillusionment: ‘No other profession is like this, the levels of protection are weak, and we are seen as not to be trusted’ (survey), and ‘England is in a much worse place than other countries in UK and Ireland due to the performativity culture, the privatisation of routes into teaching and the culture of compliance with Ofsted’ (survey). Another respondent noted: ‘It feels like they are playing Universities off against each other . . . from our perspective, it feels like you have just been told you are rubbish, and they just want to get rid of you’ (survey). Some participants linked feelings of burnout to ‘government intervention’ (survey) and reported that ‘government ITE policy undermines any sense of satisfaction I gain from the role’ (survey). Indeed, participants argued the inspection process fostered an adversarial atmosphere that runs counter to the typically supportive and collegial work of TEs, fostering an unwelcome sense of competition: ‘The reality is people involved in teacher training don’t want to compete with each other’ (interview).

Participants highlighted the long-term toll the cycle of inspections can take: ‘After an inspection, you have a period of recovery and then a year or two of “getting on with the job” and then the gradual build-up starts because you don’t know when they are going to come’ (interview). The focus on evaluation was perceived as detracting from other elements of the job, challenging participants’ sense of their profession. One reported: ‘I’m just doing this because other people have told me to do this and that; it’s just really tiring’ (survey). Others reported a deeper level of dissatisfaction arising from ‘the direction of travel in ITE being pushed by the government’ and the lack of appropriate remuneration ‘to compensate programme leaders for their responsibility’ (survey). In such ways, the paradox of Ofsted inspections of ITE becomes apparent; they aim to improve educational outcomes, yet participants felt undermined and undervalued in their role. Many suggest they may indirectly affect the quality of education provided and contribute to staff turnover within the sector: ‘If anything was going to drive you out of

ITE, it would be Ofsted' (survey). Others noted that 'reform isn't enough, Ofsted should be abolished' (survey).

'I'm not working down a mine'

Finally, although studies such as this are helping to alleviate the relative silence around TE mental health, the authors of this paper acknowledge some reticence among participants to discuss the topic. TEs are expected to be super-teachers and super-researchers (Ellis, 2023), so acknowledging the impact of the stressors may be seen as a chink in their armour. One participant's statement – 'I'm not working down a mine' – may reflect the perception among some TEs that the role is a relatively privileged position; it does not involve physical labour, is relatively well remunerated, and therefore TEs should not be 'melodramatic' about the toll of their work. Others indicated that their sense of perspective helped them accept the levels of stress associated with working in ITE. Considering the earlier discussion on wellbeing, it is interesting to note several respondents had left school-based teaching because of burnout – 'I was physically and mentally exhausted; I couldn't stop crying' – with many TEs agreeing 'primary and secondary have it worse' than TEs. Similarly, another participant remarked: 'Head teachers must feel a bit like football managers, they're only as good as their last couple of games, and that's their Ofsted, so if they get an Ofsted inspection and if it doesn't go well, then they are very vulnerable to being sacked or losing their pension. That wouldn't happen in a University. The University would gather around and help you, so the stakes are less high in a University' (interview). Another who experienced burnout as a teacher claimed, 'recovering from the experience has equipped me with the necessary knowledge, skills and appreciation to take greater care with my own wellbeing in ITE' (survey). So, while many TEs discussed the impact of Ofsted inspections on their professional and personal lives, others were inclined to minimise the associated mental health impact. Indeed, studies have confirmed that some TEs may feel compelled to put their heads down and 'plough on' despite awareness of the cost at many levels.

General discussion

The preliminary findings support and extend the assertion that Ofsted inspections can have unintended negative consequences (Gardezi et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2023). Specifically, this study identifies inspection-related stress for HEI-based TEs. This study highlights how the unpredictable nature of Ofsted inspections may cause anticipatory stress for TEs. One modest approach to address this could involve Ofsted considering more specific inspection time frames, as proposed by UCET in their response to the Big Listen consultation (2024). In doing so, TEs can pre-plan the associated workload with line managers, helping to reduce the stress related to 'waiting for the call'. This change would demonstrate increased trust in the profession, which is already subject to internal quality assurance and external accreditation processes. Participants also suggested that the extensive paperwork exacerbates their stress. Streamlining documentation requirements may alleviate the risk of burnout and allow TEs to continue with 'the real job'. Pilot studies could explore if streamlined documentation requirements and scheduling strategies are effective, and such

findings could inform policy adjustments. While nuanced and systematic changes in the Ofsted ITE inspection framework and associated policy are needed, professional development support – perhaps through mentoring or workshops focused on managing inspection stress – could be of value. This support may help bridge the gap while the sector awaits longer-term reforms. In addition, recognising and compensating TEs (through administrative support, teaching buyout, or workload allocation) for the additional workload associated with inspection processes may contribute positively to TE morale and buffer against feelings of disempowerment or devaluation. Such adjustments could provide practical short-term support to TEs while recognising that longer-term adjustments, including potential revisions to the frequency or criteria of inspections, could further foster a more supportive inspection environment. At the time of writing, ITE providers in England are awaiting an updated Ofsted ITE inspection handbook, which will incorporate new ITT Quality Requirements (Department for Education, 2024c) and reflect some of the inspection changes that have begun at the school level. The expectation is that changes will come into effect in 2025.

Limitations and directions for future research

Whilst this paper offers new insight into an important but under-researched topic, the authors acknowledge several limitations. Firstly, the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings. Future studies could expand the scope and examine TEs' wellbeing pre- and post-Ofsted inspection. This may provide interesting longitudinal data on anticipatory stress associated with inspections and confirm the patterns observed here. This study's participant profile reflects the female-dominated nature of the HEI-based ITE profession; the findings presented here may not exemplify the experiences of men or non-binary TEs. For example, it has been suggested that male teachers experience unique stressors, such as self-stigma in a predominantly female profession (Palmer et al., 2019). Future research could address gender dynamics to reveal nuanced insights about stress and mental health in the ITE sector. It is also likely that contextual factors influenced participants' experiences with inspection-related stress, including workplace culture, career stage and level of HE support, which could shape TEs' stress responses. Thus, follow-ups could consider how these variables interact with the inspection process to yield a more comprehensive understanding of TEs' wellbeing and look at the experience of TEs within SCITT, Teach First, PGTA and other ITE routes.

Despite the limitations, this study offers a unique reflection on the impact of Ofsted inspections on HEI-based TEs in England. The preliminary findings may hold value for other jurisdictions with mandated ITE quality assurance, and we call for additional research to identify practical/sustainable ways to improve HE-based TEs' overall occupational wellbeing. Finally, as Ofsted inspections aim to uphold educational standards, their unintended impact on the mental health of HEI-based TEs – those who prepare future teachers to enter our classrooms – reveals a pressing need for reforms that prioritise wellbeing as central to quality ITE. In so doing, Ofsted would ensure that inspections support rather than undermine the profession.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen et al., 2005)

Personal Burnout Inventory*

How often do you feel tired?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never/Almost Never

How often are you physically exhausted?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never/Almost Never

How often are you emotionally exhausted?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never/Almost Never

How often do you think: 'I can't take it anymore'?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never/Almost Never

How often do you feel worn out?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never/Almost Never

How often do you feel weak and susceptible to illness?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never/Almost Never

Part A: Work-Related Burnout*

Is your work as Teacher Educator emotionally exhausting?

- To a very high degree
- To a high degree
- Somewhat
- To a low degree
- To a very low degree

Do you feel burnt out because of your work as a Teacher Educator?

- To a very high degree
- To a high degree
- Somewhat
- To a low degree
- To a very low degree

Does your work frustrate you?

- To a very high degree
- To a high degree
- Somewhat
- To a low degree
- To a very low degree

Part B: Work-Related Burnout*

Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never/Almost Never

Are you exhausted in the morning at the thought of another day at work?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never/Almost Never

Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never/Almost Never

Do you have enough energy for family and friends during leisure time?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never/Almost Never

Part A: Student-Related Burnout*

Do you find it hard to work with student-teachers?

- To a very high degree
- To a high degree
- Somewhat
- To a low degree
- To a very low degree

Do you find it frustrating to work with student-teachers?

To a very high degree
To a high degree
Somewhat
To a low degree
To a very low degree

Does it drain your energy to work with student-teachers?

To a very high degree
To a high degree
Somewhat
To a low degree
To a very low degree

Do you feel that you give more than you get back when you work with student-teachers?

To a very high degree
To a high degree
Somewhat
To a low degree
To a very low degree

Part B: Student-Related Burnout*

Are you tired of working with student-teachers?

Always
Often
Sometimes
Seldom
Never/Almost Never

Do you sometimes wonder how long you will be able to continue working with student-teachers?

Always
Often
Sometimes
Seldom
Never/Almost Never

Open-Ended Survey Questions

The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen et al., 2005) distinguishes between Personal, Work-Related, and Student-Related Burnout.

The following open-ended questions define these three areas and ask participants to reflect on them individually.

Personal burnout is defined as a state of prolonged physical and psychological exhaustion (Kristensen et al., 2005). Personal burnout can be experienced by all people (young, old, retired, employed, etc.) It is not specific to the role of the Teacher Educator. If you have experienced personal burnout, can you identify the contributing factors?*

What protective factors support your general feelings of personal wellbeing?*

Work-related burnout is defined as a state of prolonged physical and psychological exhaustion, which is perceived as related to the person's work (Kristensen et al., 2005). For the purpose of this study, Teacher Educators are a specific category of academic staff

working in the field of Initial Teacher Education within a HEI. Their work is broad and generally includes activities in three domains – Teaching, Research, and Service. If you have experienced work-related burnout as a Teacher Educator, can you identify the contributing factors? *

What protective factors support your feelings of wellbeing in your general work as a HEI Teacher Educator?*

At a more specific level, student-related burnout is defined as a state of prolonged physical and psychological exhaustion, which is perceived as directly related to the person's work with students (Kristensen et al., 2005). Much of the work of the Teacher Educator relates directly to working with PSTs (for example, supervision, mentoring, assessment, etc.). If you have experienced student-related burnout as a Teacher Educator, can you identify the contributing factors?*

Can you identify the protective factors that support your feelings of wellbeing when working with PSTs?*

Is there anything you would like to add on the topic of Burnout in HEI Teacher Educators? *