

FITZSIMONS, S. and SMITH, D. 2025. Ofsted inspections affect not just teachers but also the people who train them. *The conversation* [online], 6 February 2025. Available from: <https://theconversation.com/ofsted-inspections-affect-not-just-teachers-but-also-the-people-who-train-them-249084>

# Ofsted inspections affect not just teachers but also the people who train them.

FITZSIMONS, S. and SMITH, D.

2025

# Ofsted inspections affect not just teachers but also the people who train them

*Sabrina Fitzsimons (Dublin City University) and David Smith (Robert Gordon University)*

Ofsted, England's education inspectorate, has proposed changes to the way it assesses schools, colleges and universities that offer teacher training. The suggested changes include the move to a [report-card system](#) rather than a headline judgment.

These changes stem from Ofsted's [The Big Listen](#) consultation, which gathered insights from children, parents and education professionals.

The findings brought many issues to light. Among the biggest was the negative impact of inspections on [teachers](#).

Data suggests that nearly [three-quarters](#) of teachers believe the process is bad for their mental health. In extreme cases, the stress has been [linked to suicide](#). The effect of inspections on teachers has rightly received attention from [researchers](#), media outlets and [union](#) and professional education bodies.

But the toll Ofsted takes on mental health and wellbeing extends beyond schools. Ofsted also inspects and regulates organisations involved in [education, training and care](#), including early years education, further education colleges and initial teacher education providers.

As part of a wider study on burnout among university staff who train teachers in the UK and Ireland, [our research](#) has explored the effect of Ofsted on these staff in England. We carried out detailed interviews with five teacher educators, and 36 responded to a survey on their experiences.

Academics who teach trainee teachers balance their scholarly duties with providing practical preparation and training. They are not necessarily a group people imagine when they think of Ofsted inspections. However, because the quality of teacher education affects classrooms, they are appraised to ensure quality and accountability. The inspections are high stakes, with reputational consequences for a poor report.

# The process of inspection

Like school-based inspections, teacher education inspections follow a structured process. Ofsted inspections for initial teacher training providers are [currently paused](#) until January 2026, as changes to the inspection process are made - including the introduction of report cards to replace remove the overall effectiveness grade. But it is as yet unclear how much of the inspection process will change.

When we interviewed staff, institutions received just three days' notice of the inspection date, and were required to [submit key documentation](#), including trainee and placement data, timetables and curriculum details for pre-inspection review.

This was followed by an on-site visit lasting up to five days, during which Ofsted inspectors observed teaching, interviewed staff and trainees and assessed paperwork. They then gave feedback before publishing a final review.

Ofsted maintains inspections act as a force for improvement. However, many teacher educators see them as high-stakes scrutiny rather than meaningful support.

We found that inspections had a negative effect on the wellbeing of the university staff in ways that mirrored the experiences of school teachers. For example, they talked of the "exhausting" unpredictability of anticipating an inspection. Although inspections are carried out every three years, initial teacher education providers were never sure when the call will come.

This resulted in months of worried waiting. "At the moment, we are expecting Ofsted, so that means every Wednesday between January to June, they might ring," one member of staff told us.

This stress reflects a wider flaw in the accountability system at both school and higher education levels. Fear of inspection outweighs its intended purpose of improvement.

In its response to the Big Listen, Ofsted stated that it would review the notice periods it gave for inspections to reduce the pressure on providers. But wider change is needed to address the effect inspections have on wellbeing.

Staff described how the constant cycle of inspections shaped their occupational wellbeing. Following the inspection, assuming it went well, they would get back to the job they love for one or two years before the anticipatory stress returned. Perhaps most tellingly, as with school teachers, participants suggested it was

putting them off their profession: "If anything was going to drive you out of initial teacher education, it would be Ofsted."

## Burnout and performativity

Though Ofsted insists inspections should reflect normal practice, teacher educators know better. The demand to document every aspect of their work means long hours under high pressure with little time to switch off. This constant performance mode increases their risk of burnout. "It almost doubles your workload because you are doing your job and making sure you can demonstrate you are doing the job," one said.

For some, the need to prove compliance results in tunnel vision that overrides their day-to-day work, including supporting students and teaching.

Beyond workload, Ofsted inspections can take a heavy emotional and professional toll, making teacher educators feel undervalued. For some, the process creates a demoralising, adversarial environment. "It feels like they are playing universities off against each other," one respondent said. Competition enters a usually collaborative atmosphere, but "the reality is people involved in teacher training don't want to compete with each other", we were told in an interview.

The role of a university-based teacher educator also comes with stresses particular to higher education. Unfortunately, much of the preparation staff do for Ofsted is invisible in university workload models, while academia's research-over-teaching bias downplays their valuable contributions. They are also working against the shadow of mass [staff cuts](#) at universities.

A streamlined, transparent, and predictable process that supports rather than overburdens staff could help retain their talent and expertise. Otherwise, in addition to a teacher shortage, there may be a shortage of people who teach them.