

# New teachers' responses to Covid-19

Building on initial teacher education  
for professional learning

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

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# Summary

This study investigated new teachers' responses to the demands of online teaching during national lockdowns in Scotland in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. A survey of new teachers in Scotland (part of the Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education project; see Shanks, 2020 and [www.mquite.scot](http://www.mquite.scot)) found that they responded very positively to meeting the challenge of emergency remote teaching – a finding that contradicted emerging research from other countries which suggested that teachers were struggling with online learning in particular. We also held a series of focus groups in order to answer the following questions.

1. What, in their initial teacher education programmes and induction, prepared and enabled new teachers in Scotland to handle the unexpected changes in teaching and learning brought about by the pandemic?
2. What professional learning needs, if any, were highlighted during lockdown?

Our findings suggest that our understanding of new teachers' responses to emergency remote teaching needs to move beyond an emphasis on their ability to teach online or use online tools, to draw on a broader concept of teacher reflexivity and how new teachers reflect on and gradually embed pedagogical change. We are able to make a theoretical and methodological contribution to how teacher efficacy is measured in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD, 2018). Furthermore, we offer an adaptation of Puentadura's (2010) substitution augmentation modification redefinition (SAMR) model of technology change in pedagogy, adding our own interpretation of leadership roles for newly qualified teachers as part of their professional learning. Finally, we suggest that existing provision for initial teacher education in Scotland does not require substantial modification in order to meet new demands in uncertain times.

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# 1. Introduction & literature review

This research builds on the Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education (MQuITE) project, a longitudinal study currently following two cohorts of graduates from their final year of study into and through their early teaching career (Shanks, 2020; see also [www.mquite.scot](http://www.mquite.scot)). The March 2020 MQuITE survey (which had 243 respondents, 85 of whom volunteered to be in a focus group for the present study) included a question about Covid-19. This question – ‘In your teaching, to what extent can you respond to new initiatives or changes (e.g., emergency remote teaching)?’ – was integrated into the self-efficacy ratings section, which adopts the same format as TALIS (OECD, 2018). This was intended to reflect the fact that it would not be fair to judge initial teacher education on how well it prepared new teachers for working during a pandemic, and that, furthermore, we did not wish to ask solely about remote or blended learning. Instead, we wanted to allow teachers to self-define all the ways in which they needed to be prepared for supporting learning remotely *and* in an emergency.

Responses to this question in the 2020 MQuITE survey indicated that new teachers largely felt able to respond to such changes. All responses were on a four-point rating scale, in which 4 signified ‘a lot’: for this question, the responses averaged 3.4 (the highest mean of any of the efficacy questions). This compares favourably with overall efficacy ratings across the other 21 efficacy dimensions that are listed in the survey, which suggests that teachers felt even more able to respond to emergency remote teaching than they did in relation to many other aspects of teaching considered standard abilities by the OECD (Carver & Shanks, 2021).

The present study, funded by BERA, was intended to inform initial teacher education curriculum planning by running focus groups with MQuITE survey respondents to understand what helped them to respond to challenges that arose from Covid-19. We pursued it following discussions in institutions about how best to prepare student teachers for their future careers, and what professional learning might

be offered to in-service teachers. Understanding why new teachers seemed to be adapting well to this unexpected challenge could prevent changes being made to elements of current provision that are already working, while also identifying where enhancements could be made.

Rather than adopting theoretical frameworks of technological change and managing change in a crisis, we adopted a theoretical framework centred on how teachers see themselves as assuming broader roles within society and their local communities (Valcke, 2013); how teachers see their role shifting when embedding pedagogical change (Twiselton, 2000); how professionals develop confidence in their abilities to exert control over their environment (Bandura, 1997); and how initial teacher education aspires to develop ‘the ability to adjust to change, especially rapid change, which is important to engaging with an uncertain future’ (Nikel & Lowe, 2010, p. 599).

Teachers in Scotland experienced sudden, unexpected transitions to online learning approaches during several waves of lockdown in response to Covid-19. Efforts in other countries to make sense of similar changes emphasised coping strategies and struggles around online tools (for example, O’Meara & Gentles, 2020), underpinned by concepts of (a lack of) preparedness and efficacy. For instance, ‘struggling’ dominated narratives from Canada (Van Nuland et al., 2020), while 83 per cent of teachers surveyed in Brazil felt ‘little or not prepared at all to teach remotely’ (Prata-Linhares et al., 2020, p. 3). Other studies, such as Leacock and Warrican’s (2020), drew upon change management for their theoretical framework, finding that teachers were finally able to overcome longstanding resistance to pedagogical change.

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## 2. Research design

The project's research questions were as follows.

- How did initial teacher education and induction prepare new teachers for teaching in uncertain times?
- What do the responses of new teachers to Covid-19 indicate about the development of teacher reflexivity in initial teacher education and induction?
- What professional learning needs for new teachers have been highlighted during the Covid-19 crisis?

To explore why new teachers felt able to respond to changes such as emergency remote teaching, we held three online focus groups with volunteers from the MQUTE study cohort, all of them graduates of the researchers' institutions, the Universities of Aberdeen and Strathclyde, and participants in the MQUTE project. The intake of the Universities of Aberdeen and Strathclyde accounts for just under half of all initial teacher education places in Scotland, although there are nine other institutions in Scotland that offer initial teacher education.

MQUTE first received ethical approval at the University of Edinburgh and then transferred to the University of Strathclyde, where its data – including data from this project – is stored securely. An ethics update application to run online focus groups around Covid-19 specifically for this project was approved by the University of Strathclyde and endorsed by the University of Aberdeen.

Three focus groups were held during tiered restrictions in late 2020 (n=10), with some of these teachers being revisited during a further lockdown in early 2021 (n=3). T-tests were used to check for sampling bias based on average efficacy rating from across the whole scale, efficacy in emergency remote teaching, and efficacy in using ICT. Differences in the mean between the sample and the rest of the MQUTE cohort were small and not statistically significant (-.15 emergency remote teaching, -.07 efficacy mean score, +.09 ICT efficacy,  $p > .05$ ).

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## 3. Findings

Initial line-by-line coding was consolidated into key themes concerning how teachers see their role in the classroom and in their communities; their sense of efficacy and autonomy in relation to school and local authority guidance; and their ability to remain true to their own values when adapting to new demands. We found that teachers experienced an initial coping phase in which they wanted to be told ‘what to do’ before quickly finding their own approaches suited to their learners. As attention turned away from simply ‘getting by’ and completing learning tasks, teachers engaged with online professional development and formed new networks to support their teaching. There was an emphasis on peer support and on having confidence in their ability to acquire new skills as needed. We noted that teachers needed to give themselves permission to lower their expectations of themselves, trusting to a future Covid recovery plan for anything that could not be done as effectively as usual during lockdown. In the second round of focus groups, held in February 2021 during a further lockdown, discussions focused on how pedagogical change had been embedded and how professional learning and reflections from the first lockdown had affected preparations for the next lockdown.

As we developed a theoretical framework, we noted differences between what teachers *thought* they should or could be doing, and their *ability* to adhere to their principles when disrupted. During the first lockdown, some expectations were set at regional and national level – such as whether teachers could teach live classes or new material – but we found that teachers created informal networks to go beyond what was permitted and to work out what effective remote teaching could entail. In common with the ‘coping’ narratives from other countries experiencing their first lockdowns, teachers spoke of keeping students ‘busy’, in most cases by providing content and self-contained tasks that the students could show they had completed. As well as the emotional impact on the teacher (‘You just felt like you were just in a bubble, just kind of putting out what you could’), discussion centred around temporary measures that would be ‘over by Easter’ 2020, and the need to simply think ‘week-by-week’. We saw such comments as

echoing Twiselton’s (2000) model in which teachers coping with change first focus on managing pupil tasks, as well as Puentadura’s (2010) model in which the first step towards pedagogical change through technology is to seek direct substitutes for traditional pedagogical strategies.

As the first lockdown continued, new teachers said they moved into expanding their professional networks, seeking out professional learning opportunities and sharing resources and ideas in order to get back to the kind of pedagogy that they each valued. There was an appreciation of new roles as these newly qualified teachers became school experts in online tools, drawing upon skills from Apple Teacher or Microsoft Certified training programmes and using screen capture to create ‘how to’ and walkthrough videos for both pupils and colleagues. We interpreted this as the start of a move through Twiselton’s (2000) three stages (task manager, content deliverer, skills developer) towards focusing on skills. Our data suggested that the ways in which teachers responded to the demands of emergency remote teaching resembled an accelerated form of how they develop their pedagogical aims more generally. Likewise, the work of Nikel and Lowe (2010) helped to explain how the new teachers were able to engage with uncertainty by returning to core pedagogical ideas within an online community of fellow teachers. The emerging leadership role taken on by new teachers was novel, suggesting that disruption to normal ways of working led to the formation of online communities comprising a wider membership. These online communities produced a positive disruption to established leadership roles in teachers’ communities of practice and allowed new leaders to emerge based on their up-to-date knowledge and skills.

When we revisited some of the focus group participants in February 2021, sentiment around managing well had strengthened: the teachers were, in many respects, thriving amid the uncertainty of remote learning. This fitted with the higher levels of Puentadura’s (2010) substitution augmentation modification redefinition (SAMR) model, moving from substitution to redefinition as the teachers reflected on new approaches in terms of their



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potential for continued use as pupils returned to in-person classes. Interpreting this as reflection on pedagogical change, rather than a change in the use of online tools, helped us to overcome some of the criticism of Puentadura's model as an oversimplified framework that overemphasises technological tools rather than pedagogy (for example, Hamilton et al., 2016). In particular, discussions around assessment planning, homework, small-group work and practical tasks such as science experiments suggested that the teachers in this study quickly moved from substitutions which they found unsatisfactory to redefinition approaches which engaged positively with lockdown restrictions. We are working on a theoretical framework to explain the professional learning experiences that supported these positive and pedagogy-led responses to change.

# 4. Discussion & implications

When we looked at what made the difference to the new teachers who participated in the focus groups, they referred to people, tools and a lowering of expectations for what they could achieve. They valued the novelty of helping ‘other staff who were struggling’ by, for example, creating ‘how to’ videos for colleagues. They developed peer support through Microsoft Teams, Facebook, hashtags and through their local and university networks. They felt that they were prepared with specific tools such as Apple Teacher and Microsoft Certified. They were able to rapidly access online professional learning as they knew where and how to access it – for example, finding out on Twitter which courses were recommended or free to take. Expectations for their work had been lowered – for some because of the cancellation of exams, for others because of the corporate ‘do what you can’ message and through Covid recovery plans. More broadly, we offer a theoretical framework for understanding the key aspects of how the teachers reflexively engaged with the challenges of emergency remote teaching. This framework (see table 4.1 below) has three distinct aspects.

- A. How new teachers approach online teaching.
- B. How new teacher support their colleagues.
- C. How new teachers benefit from their professional learning community.

In table 4.1 we show how the new teachers developed their practice in reactive, proactive and reflective phases in their online teaching. They supported colleagues and benefited from their own professional learning communities in reactive and proactive ways. While we did not find evidence of reflective approaches to support for colleagues or professional learning, these may develop in future.

Below we discuss the implications of our findings for practitioners, policymakers and academics.

## 4.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Our findings show that support is needed for practitioners’ professional learning, and for their pupils, through pedagogy-led implementations of digital technologies. Reflecting on their current position in relation to the three aspects and three phases of our model may be a helpful starting point for practitioners who wish to reflect upon their professional learning during the pandemic. School leaders may find this study encouraging and helpful for developing in-service learning as schools return to in-person teaching, while local authorities may wish to reflect upon their role in facilitating and constraining teachers’ exercise of reflexivity and efficacy.

**Table 4.1**  
The aspects and phases of new teachers’ reflexivity developed in response to the challenges of emergency remote teaching (adapted from Puentedura, 2010).

		ASPECTS		
		A. How new teachers approach online learning	B. How new teachers supported other teachers	C. How new teachers benefit from their professional learning community
PHASE	1. Reactive	Imitation & substitution. Focus on limitations compared with previous classroom practice.	New teachers introduce common tools and techniques from their existing experience.	Community shares information and reassurance around ‘getting started’ and making compromises.
	2. Proactive	Modification and adjustment of tasks. Focus on setting new learning goals to work with what is practical.	New teachers share resources and strategies from their developing practice.	Community shares advice and strategies for effective and engaging activities.
	3. Reflective	Redefinition of tasks and goals. Focus on embedding change into a consistent pedagogical approach.	Yet to be determined – hopefully supporting schools and the wider professional learning community in embedding new practices.	

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## 4.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

We find that, in the case of Scotland, there is little evidence that teacher education needs to explicitly focus on preparing teachers for working in a pandemic – teacher reflexivity appears to be sufficiently well-developed that showing them how to use particular online teaching tools would add little. In sharing these findings, we hope to engage in discussion as to whether such a recommendation might be suitable for other countries and for more experienced teachers, and what kind of research is needed to inform such transferability. In ‘phase 3’ of our model we suggest that embedding pedagogical learning gained during lockdown into regular classroom practice has the potential to provide valuable professional learning opportunities, and that new teachers may be able to take a leading role in such knowledge exchange.

## 4.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMICS

This study suggests that the current TALIS questions on self-efficacy ratings (OECD, 2018) require greater theorising to support their use in understanding teacher preparedness and effectiveness, particularly teacher reflexivity. For instance, it remains unclear to what extent responses to different items should be expected to correlate, how efficacy relates to teachers’ assumptions about the likely demands of their current role, and hence whether higher efficacy ratings are indicative of greater effectiveness in teachers, initial teacher education or in-service professional learning.

As a contribution to theory, by supporting Nikel and Lowe’s (2010) argument that teacher reflexivity is an important measure of initial teacher education quality, this work feeds into the aim of the larger MQuITE project to develop a suitably nuanced framework for evaluating the quality of initial teacher education in Scotland.

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# 5. Conclusion

This study presents a positive view of how professional learning during and from the pandemic may contribute to pedagogy-led integration of technology in the future, with new teachers emerging from the crisis ready to lead. This is not to negate the huge personal, emotional, financial and human costs of the pandemic, or its impact on pupils. While our theoretical framework draws out optimistic findings, our participants expressed concerns around teacher precarity and role uncertainty. If new teachers find themselves under- or un-employed, this jeopardises their chances to learn from the pandemic. They also spoke of their expectations that their first few years would be tough, but we may wish to reconsider just how punishing new teachers find their induction if they report being able to take a global pandemic in their stride. This study included teachers who were shielding and who had serious concerns about family members, and the toll exerted on them by responding so positively to the pandemic should not be underestimated.

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