

OFSTED INSPECTION REPORTS

Professional Development & Teaching Quality



A thematic analysis of links between leadership, professional learning, and the quality of curriculum and teaching

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Based on 160 Ofsted inspection reports under the current Education Inspection Framework

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Executive Summary

This report examines what 160 recent Ofsted inspection reports tell us about the relationship between leadership and governance, professional learning and development for teachers (and equivalent roles such as tutors, trainers, coaches and assessors), and the quality of curriculum and teaching.

The dataset covers 122 independent training providers, 13 employer providers, 9 General FE colleges, 7 adult and community learning providers, 4 sixth form colleges, 3 specialist colleges, and 2 universities. Initial teacher training and residential colleges are excluded from scope.

Headline findings:

- Leadership grade is the strongest predictor of curriculum and teaching grade in this dataset. 62% of providers with Strong leadership achieve Strong or above for curriculum and teaching; 0% of those with Needs Attention leadership do. No provider crosses the boundary in either direction: Strong leadership does not produce Needs Attention teaching, and Needs Attention leadership does not produce Strong teaching.
- Where inspection reports describe professional development as targeted, sustained and pedagogically focused, curriculum and teaching is consistently graded Strong. Where CPD is described as generic, technically focused at the expense of pedagogy, or recently introduced without time to take effect, weaker curriculum outcomes follow.
- Where reports describe professional development as targeted, sustained and pedagogically focused, curriculum and teaching is consistently graded Strong. Where reports describe professional development as absent, generic or technically focused at the expense of pedagogy, curriculum and teaching is significantly more likely to fall to Needs Attention.
- All 14 providers rated Needs Attention for curriculum and teaching have either Expected or Needs Attention leadership. The most consistent CPD-related finding in their reports is that development activity is not targeted at actual gaps in pedagogy, subject expertise, or learner-need understanding.
- Three patterns recur in weak-curriculum providers: (a) volume without targeting, where 'a range of CPD' is not differentiated to actual staff need; (b) technical updating without pedagogical development; (c) recently-introduced CPD programmes whose impact has not yet landed in classrooms or workplaces.
- Strong-curriculum providers consistently invest in three things: subject and industry expertise of staff, structured pedagogical coaching for staff, and routine evaluation of the impact of professional learning on practice.

Scope and Method

Reports analysed: 160 Ofsted inspection reports completed under the current Education Inspection Framework, primarily inspected late 2025 to early 2026. Initial teacher training (1 report) and residential colleges (none in dataset) were excluded. NHS providers with the word 'University' in their name (e.g. Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust) are categorised as Employer Providers, not Universities, in line with their inspected provision type.

Grades extracted: For each provider, this analysis took the headline Leadership and governance grade, plus all Curriculum and teaching sub-grades reported across provision types within the same report (Apprenticeships, Adult learning programmes, Education programmes for young people, Skills Bootcamps, Provision for learners with high needs, etc.). The modal Curriculum and teaching grade was used as the per-provider value.

CPD evidence extraction: A natural-language analysis of the Leadership and governance and Curriculum and teaching narrative sections identified sentences referencing professional development, professional learning, staff/tutor/trainer/coach training, subject and industry expertise, peer support, coaching, communities of practice, moderation and standardisation. Each sentence was scored for positive quality framing (e.g. 'highly effective', 'comprehensive', 'expert', 'systematic') and negative framing (e.g. 'limited', 'insufficient', 'do not', 'out of date').

Each provider was then assigned an indicative CPD signal:

- Strong CPD signal: four or more positive references with at most one negative; reports describe development as systematic, targeted, sustained, and impacting practice.
- Expected CPD signal: routine, mostly positive references without strong evidence of either excellence or weakness.
- Weak CPD signal: two or more explicit negative references, or one or more critiques alongside very limited positive content.

This indicator is descriptive, not an Ofsted grade. It captures how clearly the inspection text frames professional learning. Two providers with similar grades may have very different CPD signals depending on how concretely their reports describe development practice. Care should be taken not to over-read the indicator: it is most reliable at the extremes.

Headline Correlations

Leadership and governance vs curriculum and teaching

The clearest finding is that leadership grade strongly predicts curriculum and teaching grade. The cross-tabulation below reports providers whose modal Curriculum and teaching grade across provision types matches each Leadership and governance grade.

L&G grade	C&T Excpt	C&T Strong	C&T Expected	C&T Needs Attn	Total	% Strong+
Exceptional	0	1	0	0	1	100%
Strong standard	0	26	16	0	42	62%
Expected standard	0	13	82	7	102	13%
Needs attention	0	0	8	7	15	0%
ALL (160)	0	40	106	14	160	25%

Two patterns are absolute in this dataset. First, no provider with Strong leadership has slipped to Needs Attention for curriculum and teaching. Second, no provider with Needs Attention leadership has reached Strong Standard for curriculum and teaching. Leadership grade therefore acts as a hard ceiling on teaching quality. The corollary is that providers seeking to lift teaching quality above Expected Standard must invariably resolve leadership weaknesses first, and providers with Strong leadership rarely allow teaching quality to fall.

The Expected Standard band is where the variance lives. Of the 102 providers rated Expected for leadership, 13 (13%) achieve Strong+ for curriculum and teaching, 82 (80%) sit at Expected, and 7 (7%) have fallen to Needs Attention. This 13% 'over-perform' group is interesting: their leadership is judged as adequate rather than exceptional, but they have nonetheless built strong teaching. In every case examined, professional development for teaching staff features prominently as a strength in their report.

CPD signal vs curriculum and teaching

The CPD signal also tracks curriculum quality, particularly at the extremes. The cross-tabulation below shows the relationship.

CPD signal	C&T Strong+	C&T Expected	C&T Needs Attn	Total	% Needs Attn
Strong CPD signal	1	5	0	6	0%
Expected CPD signal	39	95	10	144	7%
Weak CPD signal	0	6	4	10	40%
ALL (160)	40	106	14	160	9%

Where reports give a Weak CPD signal (explicit critique of how leaders develop their staff), curriculum and teaching is approximately six times more likely to be at Needs Attention (40% vs 7% baseline). Where reports give a Strong CPD signal, no provider has fallen to Needs Attention. Reports rarely give a maximally Strong signal because the language thresholds are stringent; but the asymmetry at the negative end is consistent and substantial.

Combined with the Leadership/Curriculum cross-tab, this reinforces the picture: leadership creates the conditions in which teaching can thrive, and the most visible mechanism by which it does so is the design and impact of staff professional learning.

What the Strongest Providers Do

Across the 26 providers with both Strong leadership and Strong curriculum and teaching, four common features recur in the inspection narrative.

1. Subject and industry expertise built and maintained

Reports consistently describe staff drawing on current technical, vocational or academic expertise. This is rarely accidental; leaders invest in keeping it current.

“Trainers are subject experts with extensive experience in the sector. They utilise this expertise skilfully when teaching key content.” — National Grid Electricity Distribution — Strong L&G, Strong C&T

“Coaches have extensive industry expertise. They teach new content skilfully... Leaders have developed a highly effective teaching model. Expert skills coaches provide apprentices with excellent teaching and assessment.” — LDN Apprenticeships Ltd — Strong L&G, Strong C&T

“Instructors and teaching assistants are subject experts. Instructors use their current industry expertise to make sessions engaging.” — Tech Educators Ltd — Strong L&G, Strong C&T

2. Targeted pedagogical development, not just technical updating

Strong providers explicitly invest in how staff teach, not only what they know. Pedagogical CPD is named, planned, and reviewed against impact.

“Leaders invest heavily in professional development to enable staff to maintain their industry expertise and improve their teaching. Staff undertake teacher training and development on a range of topics such as artificial intelligence.” — Apprenticeship Learning Solutions Ltd — Strong L&G, Strong C&T

“Staff complete highly valuable and relevant training to enable them to provide, monitor and adapt very effective support... Leaders have rigorous quality processes, which they use to inform the bespoke professional development

completed by staff. This includes peer support practice, communities of practice and scholarship in teaching.” — Sheffield Hallam University — Strong L&G, Strong C&T

3. Structured coaching and peer learning

Coaching of staff by staff (explicit role models, observation, peer review, communities of practice) is mentioned much more often in Strong-curriculum providers than in Expected or weaker peers.

“Leaders have implemented a highly effective model where coaches provide a seamless link between all aspects of their apprenticeships, which is key to the strong inclusive practice and development of apprentices as professionals.” — Sheffield Hallam University — Strong L&G, Strong C&T

“New starters receive structured induction and peer support, while emerging leaders gain confidence through mentoring and qualifications.” — LDN Apprenticeships Ltd — Strong L&G, Strong C&T

4. Impact monitoring of professional learning

Strong providers do not just deliver CPD; they evaluate whether it changes practice. This is a distinguishing feature: many Expected-grade providers run development programmes, but only the strongest report on its measured effect.

“Leaders have rigorous quality processes, which they use to inform the bespoke professional development completed by staff... Leaders are considerate of the wellbeing and workloads of staff and ensure that there is sufficient time to enable this valuable training and collaboration.” — Sheffield Hallam University — Strong L&G, Strong C&T

“Leaders use comprehensive labour market intelligence to plan the curriculum offer and content expertly. Employers and stakeholders co-design the curriculums and contribute directly to teaching through live projects and work-based assignments.” — Capel Manor College — Expected L&G, Expected C&T (a near-Strong example of curriculum design coupled with staff development)

Patterns in Weaker Outcomes

Of the 14 providers rated Needs Attention for curriculum and teaching, the inspection narrative repeatedly highlights three CPD-related patterns.

Pattern 1: Volume without targeting

The most common pattern in Needs Attention curriculum providers is not the absence of CPD, but its lack of focus. Leaders are running activity, but it is not differentiated to actual staff weaknesses or learner needs.

“Leaders provide a range of professional development for tutors, but this is not sufficiently focused on improving teaching practice to improve tutors’ teaching skills.” — Avereed Ltd — Needs Attention L&G, Needs Attention C&T

“Leaders provide staff with varied professional development relevant to the industry and learners’ support needs... They do not consistently plan highly tailored or focused programmes of professional development that supports trainers to continue to develop their teaching skills.” — WYK Group Limited — Strong L&G, Strong C&T (the negative quote sits in an otherwise strong picture, illustrating that even strong providers can have targeting weaknesses)

Pattern 2: Technical updating without pedagogical development

Several Needs Attention providers update staff on sector content but do not invest equivalently in how staff teach that content.

“Leaders support staff to update their technical skills continuously to ensure they remain relevant in a changing sector... However, leaders do not fully utilise this information to target pedagogical professional development.” — Steve Willis Training Ltd — Expected L&G, Needs Attention C&T

“Leaders do not provide high-quality professional development for training advisers to improve their practice, especially for supporting apprentices with barriers to learning.” — SAMB Training (Scottish Association of Master) — Needs Attention L&G, Needs Attention C&T

Pattern 3: Programmes introduced before impact can be seen

A notable share of weak-curriculum providers describe new or research-informed CPD programmes that have not yet had time to take effect. Inspectors note it honestly, but it points to a timing issue for leaders: introducing CPD after weakness is identified leaves a meaningful lag before classroom or workplace impact appears.

“Leaders have implemented a research-informed professional learning programme, which is beginning to have a positive impact on tutors’ practice. However, in A-level physics and GCSE English and mathematics, tutors who cover lessons lack subject expertise, which negatively impacts learners’ progress.” — Furness College — Needs Attention L&G, Needs Attention C&T

“Although leaders have developed training for staff to improve their coaching and teaching skills, it is too early to see the impact of this.” — Thompsons Academy trading as Navigators — Expected L&G, Needs Attention C&T

“Leaders have recently developed a professional learning programme to ensure that all trainers develop their teaching practice.” — OnPointTrac — Needs Attention L&G, Needs Attention C&T

Pattern 4: Acknowledged absence

In a smaller group, the report names the gap directly: leaders have not provided enough development. These reports almost universally co-occur with Needs Attention leadership.

“Leaders do not ensure that tutors receive enough professional learning to meet their needs.” — Channicool Training Services Limited — Needs Attention L&G, Needs Attention C&T

“Leaders recognise the need for further staff training to support future learners with specific needs, such as dyslexia.” — The Small Business Academy — Expected L&G, Needs Attention C&T (acknowledged but not yet acted upon)

Patterns by Provider Type

The link between leadership, professional learning and teaching quality holds across all provider types in the dataset, but presents differently depending on context.

Independent training providers (122)

ITPs make up the bulk of the dataset and the bulk of the variance. Of 122 ITPs, 31 (25%) achieve Strong+ for curriculum and teaching and 11 (9%) have fallen to Needs Attention. The strongest CPD signals in the dataset come from this group, typically smaller, more agile providers where leaders can name specific staff development priorities and link them to teaching outcomes (Apprenticeship Learning Solutions, LDN Apprenticeships, Tech Educators, Sheffield Hallam University, IBM, Banham Academy). The weakest CPD signals also come from this group, concentrated in providers with Needs Attention leadership.

General FE colleges (9)

FE colleges show a notable pattern. None achieve Strong+ for curriculum and teaching despite three achieving Strong+ for inclusion. Two have fallen to Needs Attention for curriculum and teaching (Furness College, Gower College Swansea). Four colleges have Needs Attention leadership. The size of FE college operations appears to make it harder to land consistent CPD impact across all departments and curriculum areas. Furness College in particular illustrates the timing issue: a new research-informed professional learning programme is underway, but pockets of weak subject expertise persist in cover lessons.

Employer providers (13)

Employer providers are mostly stable performers (no Needs Attention curriculum) but rarely break into Strong+ (3 of 13). Their reports tend to describe staff development as embedded in operational routines (clinical supervision, technical updates, sector training). The pedagogical dimension is often less explicit, which may explain the relative absence of Strong-curriculum employer providers despite generally adequate leadership.

Adult and community learning (7)

ACL is the strongest performing provider type for curriculum and teaching by share, with 3 of 7 (43%) at Strong+. Reports describe tutors drawing on subject and vocational expertise, and leaders investing in development that matches the diversity of adult learner need. The combination of strong leadership (5 of 7 Strong) and well-targeted CPD is worth noting as a pattern other types could examine.

Sixth form colleges (4)

Sixth form colleges show 100% alignment between leadership and curriculum grades and include the only Exceptional/Strong combination in the dataset (Newham Collegiate). Where teaching is strong, reports highlight 'expert subject knowledge and highly effective strategies to promote learning'. Where it sits at Expected, the language is more about consistency than excellence.

Universities (2)

With only two universities in scope, the sample is too small to generalise. Sheffield Hallam stands out for its description of bespoke professional development informed by quality processes, a clear example of impact-monitored CPD.

Specialist colleges (3)

Of three specialist colleges, one (Glasshouse) has Strong+ inclusion and leadership but Expected curriculum modal grade across provisions, and one (Thompsons Academy / Navigators) has Needs Attention curriculum despite Expected leadership. The specialist sector is a useful reminder that leadership-curriculum alignment is necessary but not sufficient: where new CPD programmes have not yet translated into observed practice, curriculum may lag for a period.

Implications and Recommendations

This analysis suggests that leaders aiming to lift the quality of curriculum and teaching should think of professional learning as a system of four connected elements rather than a calendar of training events.

1. Diagnose before delivering

Volume of CPD does not predict teaching quality. Targeting does. Use observation, learner work scrutiny, achievement and progression data to identify the actual gaps in subject knowledge, pedagogical skill and learner-need understanding before designing the programme. Several Needs Attention providers explicitly run 'a range' of CPD that is not connected to diagnosed need.

2. Treat technical updating and pedagogical development as distinct

Sector and subject content changes; so does the evidence on how to teach it. Strong providers invest in both. The Steve Willis Training pattern (strong technical updating, limited pedagogical development) is a useful illustration of what an imbalance looks like in practice.

3. Build coaching and peer learning into the role

Coaching, peer observation, communities of practice and structured mentoring feature consistently in Strong-curriculum providers and rarely in Needs Attention ones. They are time-intensive but appear to be the mechanism through which CPD insights actually change practice.

4. Measure impact, not participation

Strong providers report on whether professional development changes what learners experience. Expected providers report on what was delivered. This shift in measurement is a low-cost intervention with high apparent return.

5. Plan for the lag

New CPD programmes take time to land in classrooms and workplaces. Several Needs Attention providers are already implementing improvements that inspectors describe as too early to evaluate. Leaders launching new programmes should be explicit about expected timelines, build in interim impact checks, and avoid waiting for the next inspection to learn whether the programme is working.

6. Address leadership first

No provider in this dataset has achieved Strong+ for curriculum and teaching while carrying a Needs Attention leadership grade. Where leadership weaknesses exist, governance support, leadership development and, where appropriate, leadership change should precede ambitious teaching-quality initiatives; without that foundation, the latter are unlikely to land.

Appendix: Methodology, Limitations, and Provider List

Method

The text of each Ofsted inspection report was extracted using pdftotext and parsed programmatically to identify the headline grades and section text. The Curriculum and teaching grade is reported under each provision-type section in EIF reports

(Apprenticeships, Adult learning programmes, Education programmes for young people, Skills Bootcamps, Higher technical, Provision for learners with high needs). All grades were extracted; the modal grade across provision types was used as the per-provider value. Where a provider had only one provision type, the modal grade equals that single grade.

CPD signal extraction used regular expressions to identify sentences referencing professional development concepts in the Leadership and governance and Curriculum and teaching sections of each report. Sentences were scored for positive and negative quality framing using small lexicons of adjectives and modifiers. Thresholds for Strong/Expected/Weak were calibrated against a sample of reports manually inspected by the analyst.

Limitations

- The CPD signal is derived from inspection narrative, not from independent observation of the providers. It captures how clearly inspectors framed professional development in writing, which may itself reflect how well providers communicated their CPD strategy at inspection.
- Sample sizes are uneven. Findings for ITPs (n=122) are robust; findings for universities (n=2) and specialist colleges (n=3) are illustrative only.
- Modal Curriculum and teaching grade may smooth over within-report variance. A provider with two provision types graded Strong and one graded Expected would have a Strong modal, but a department-level review might surface variation that this analysis does not show.
- The analysis is correlational. It does not prove that better professional learning causes better teaching; reverse causation (good teachers attract investment) and confounding factors (provider size, sector, learner mix) are plausible.
- Initial teacher training (1 report, University of Buckingham URN 70172) and residential colleges (none in dataset) are excluded from scope. NHS providers with the word 'University' in their name are categorised as Employer Providers, not Universities.

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