



# Innovating Teacher Training in Primary Education: Cross-National Lessons from Cyprus and the United Kingdom

**Maria Karamanidou**  
University of Limassol, Cyprus

## Abstract

Teacher training is a critical driver of the quality of primary education, yet approaches vary widely across national systems. This paper presents a qualitative comparative analysis of innovative models of teacher preparation and professional development in Cyprus and the United Kingdom. Using a qualitative research design, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with teacher educators, school leaders, and trainee teachers, complemented by document analysis of national frameworks. A thematic coding approach was employed to identify patterns of innovation across both contexts. Findings highlight areas of convergence, including the growing emphasis on school-based placements, structured mentoring, and digital professional learning. Divergences emerged in the degree of formalisation: United Kingdom programmes often embed innovation through accountability frameworks and university-school partnerships, while Cypriot models emphasise relational, community-driven practices within resource-constrained environments. The analysis suggests that hybrid models combining the structured accountability of the United Kingdom with the relational adaptability of Cyprus can strengthen teacher preparation globally. The paper offers implications for policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators seeking to design sustainable, context-sensitive training pathways that foster innovation in primary education.

**Keywords:** teacher training, primary education, comparative education, Cyprus, United Kingdom

## 1. Introduction

Teacher training is widely recognised as a central determinant of educational quality, particularly in primary education, where foundational pedagogical practices, professional identities, and relationships with learners and families are established (Bush & Glover, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012; Cochran-Smith et al., 2016). Across international contexts, systems of initial teacher education and professional development are under increasing pressure to respond to social change, policy reform, technological development, and shifting expectations of schools and teachers. As a result, innovation in teacher training has become a key concern for policymakers, teacher educators, and school leaders alike (Ellis et al., 2024; Menter & Flores, 2021). Consequently, understanding innovation in teacher training requires attention to how systems organise school-based learning,

mentoring, accountability, and professional support across different national contexts (Bush & Glover, 2003; Cherkowski et al., 2021).

Cyprus and the United Kingdom provide two contrasting yet instructive cases for examining innovation in teacher training. The United Kingdom context, particularly in England, is characterised by strong regulatory and accountability frameworks that shape the organisation and evaluation of teacher education programmes. Inspection regimes and policy architectures influence how innovation is conceptualised, implemented, and evidenced within teacher training (OFSTED, 2019a; Ellis et al., 2024). While such structures can promote consistency and quality assurance, they may also generate tensions between professional learning and performativity, particularly where innovation becomes aligned with compliance rather than professional agency (Menter & Flores, 2021). In contrast, the Cypriot education system operates within a smaller national context where teacher training and professional development are more closely shaped by relational dynamics, leadership practices, and localised responses to uncertainty. Research on educational leadership in Cyprus suggests that innovation often emerges through adaptive and entrepreneurial leadership, as school leaders navigate constrained resources and evolving expectations (Pashiardis, 2022; Kafa et al., 2025). Karamanidou's work further illustrates how professional learning opportunities and mentoring practices are influenced by organisational culture, leadership styles, and informal structures (Karamanidou, 2011; Karamanidou, 2017; Karamanidou & Bush, 2017).

Despite these contextual differences, both systems face common challenges related to classroom readiness, early-career support, and the sustainability of professional learning. Recent literature points to converging innovations across national contexts, including expanded school-based placements, structured mentoring, and the growing role of digital professional learning (Hennessy et al., 2022; Khalil & Gunduz, 2023). Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping how such innovations are enacted, as educational change is not only technical but also relational and emotional, requiring attention to trust, wellbeing, and professional relationships (Cherkowski et al., 2021; Sahlin, 2023). Beyond schools and training institutions, teacher preparation is also shaped by broader educational ecologies, including engagement with families and communities (Peters et al., 2007; Lehl et al., 2020). Harris (2025) further argues that partnerships with communities can enhance teacher learning, suggesting that innovation in teacher training should extend beyond institutional boundaries.

Recent research has also highlighted the importance of sustainability and teacher wellbeing in shaping innovation in primary education. Studies of Cypriot primary schools suggest that leadership practices, mentoring cultures, and organisational conditions significantly influence teachers' professional challenges, access to support, and long-term capacity for improvement (Karamanidou, 2025a; 2005b; Karamanidou, 2026). Against this backdrop, this paper presents a qualitative, comparative analysis of innovative approaches to teacher training and professional development in Cyprus and the United Kingdom. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with teacher educators, school leaders, and trainee teachers, complemented by document analysis of national frameworks, the study examines how innovation is understood and enacted across both contexts. It explores areas of convergence and divergence in school-based training, mentoring, and digital professional learning, and considers how leadership and governance shape these processes.

The paper argues that while United Kingdom teacher training tends to embed innovation through formalised accountability structures and institutional partnerships, Cypriot approaches emphasise relational, community-driven practices within contexts of uncertainty and constraint. By comparing these models, the study proposes hybrid approaches that combine structured

accountability with relational adaptability, contributing to debates on how teacher training systems can support sustainable, context-sensitive innovation in primary education.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teacher educators, school leaders, and trainee teachers in Cyprus and the United Kingdom understand and experience innovation in teacher training and professional development?
2. What similarities and differences emerge in the ways innovation is organised and enacted across the two national contexts?
3. How do leadership practices and governance arrangements shape innovative approaches to teacher training in Cyprus and the United Kingdom?

This paper contributes a cross-national, stakeholder-informed account of how innovation in teacher training is shaped by governance and leadership conditions.

## **2. Literature Review**

This literature review situates the present study within scholarship on educational leadership, teacher education, and professional learning, with particular attention to innovation, governance, and relational practice across Cyprus and the United Kingdom. It is organised into five interrelated strands: (1) leadership, innovation, and uncertainty; (2) governance and political economy in teacher education; (3) professionalism, mentoring, and teacher development; (4) digital and inquiry-oriented professional learning; and (5) community, family engagement, and the broader ecology of primary education.

### **2.1 Leadership, Innovation, and Uncertainty**

Leadership scholarship consistently emphasises that innovation in education is shaped by how leaders respond to complexity, uncertainty, and competing demands. Bush and Glover (2003) foundational synthesis highlights that leadership is not merely a positional role but a process through which direction, influence, and support for improvement are enacted. In the Cypriot context, leadership has been explicitly linked to innovation through the lens of uncertainty and entrepreneurship. Pashiardis (2022) argues that educational leaders increasingly operate in environments characterised by ambiguity, resource constraints, and policy instability, requiring adaptive and strategic responses. Building on this, Kafa et al. (2025) provide empirical evidence that successful school leaders in Cyprus adopt entrepreneurial orientations, such as opportunity recognition, risk-taking, and strategic resource mobilisation to sustain innovation and improvement. These findings position innovation not as system-driven reform but as leadership-mediated practice.

Karamanidou's body of work further contextualises leadership in Cyprus by highlighting how leadership styles, gendered experiences, and organisational cultures shape professional opportunities and learning environments (Karamanidou, 2011; Karamanidou, 2017; Karamanidou & Bush, 2017). Her research demonstrates that leadership practices influence access to mentoring, professional progression, and informal learning, suggesting that innovation in teacher training is closely tied to leadership cultures within schools. Leadership is also emotional and relational.

Cherkowski et al. (2021) conceptualise leadership wellbeing as 'wholeness', emphasising that educational change requires attention to emotional labour, trust, and relational sustainability. This perspective is particularly salient for teacher training, where mentoring relationships and early-career support play a central role in shaping professional identity and resilience.

Extending this perspective, Karamanidou (2026) conceptualises sustainable leadership in Cyprus primary schools as leadership that balances innovation with long-term professional wellbeing, capacity building, and continuity. This work highlights that innovation is most likely to be sustained when leadership practices attend not only to change and improvement, but also to teachers' emotional labour, workload, and opportunities for professional growth. Such insights are particularly relevant for teacher training, where early-career experiences and mentoring relationships shape professional identity and resilience.

## **2.2 Governance and the Political Economy of Teacher Education**

While leadership agency is critical, innovation in teacher training is also shaped by governance structures and political economies. In the United Kingdom, teacher education has increasingly been framed through market-oriented and enterprise narratives. Ellis et al. (2024) argue that teacher education in England operates within a 'shadow state', where policy reforms, accountability mechanisms, and quasi-market arrangements restructure professional preparation. Innovation, in this context, is often systematised through standards, performance indicators, and institutional partnerships. The Education Inspection Framework (OFSTED, 2019a) plays a central role in shaping teacher education practices in England, and inspection requirements influence how training programmes are designed, how mentoring is structured, and how professional learning is evidenced. While such frameworks can promote consistency and quality assurance, they also risk narrowing professional learning to what is measurable and auditable.

Thorpe and Karamanidou (2024) study of Greek Cypriot complementary schools in England offers a valuable cross-national perspective on governance. Their analysis demonstrates how hybrid governance arrangements combine formal regulatory expectations with community-driven leadership practices. This work is particularly relevant for comparative studies, as it illustrates how innovation can emerge at the intersection of institutional regulation and relational community engagement.

## **2.3 Professionalism, Mentoring, and Teacher Development**

International research on initial teacher education (ITE) highlights the importance of strong connections between theory, practice, and mentoring in shaping teacher professionalism. Darling-Hammond and Lieberman (2017) emphasises that high-quality teacher education programmes integrate extended clinical practice, structured mentoring, and research-informed pedagogy. Similarly, Zeichner (2010) argues that practice-based teacher education strengthens professional learning by connecting university coursework with classroom experience. Research on mentoring further highlights its role in supporting early-career teachers' professional identity, resilience, and retention (Hobson et al., 2009).

Debates about innovation in teacher training are closely connected to questions of professionalism. Menter and Flores (2021) highlight enduring tensions between research-informed professionalism and policy-driven reform in teacher education, as they argue that professional learning is most sustainable when teachers are positioned as reflective practitioners rather than passive recipients of externally imposed initiatives. Mentoring and professional support are central mechanisms through which professionalism is enacted in practice. Harris (2003) framing of 'Leading Teachers: Leading Schools' foregrounds the role of teacher leadership in fostering professional learning cultures.

In Cyprus, Karamanidou's research shows that mentoring and professional support are often shaped by informal structures and leadership styles, leading to uneven access to development opportunities (Karamanidou, 2017; Karamanidou & Bush, 2017). These findings underscore that innovation in teacher training may be highly dependent on school-level leadership and

culture rather than system-wide provision. Sahlin (2023) study of how teachers interpret principals' leadership in collaborative practices further highlights the importance of leadership in shaping teachers' engagement with professional learning.

Teachers' sense-making processes influence whether collaboration and mentoring are experienced as empowering or performative, a distinction that has direct implications for how innovation is received and sustained. This pattern of uneven access aligns with Karamanidou (2025b) systematic review of primary teachers' challenges in Cyprus, which identifies workload intensification, emotional strain, and inconsistent professional support as persistent concerns. The review suggests that when mentoring and professional development are informal or leadership-dependent, they can both enable growth and reproduce inequalities. These findings reinforce the importance of examining mentoring not only as a pedagogical practice, but as a structural and ethical issue within teacher training systems.

#### **2.4 Digital and Inquiry-Oriented Professional Learning**

Digital professional learning has become an increasingly prominent dimension of innovation in teacher training. Hennessy et al. (2022) systematic review demonstrates that technology can extend access to professional development, support collaboration, and enable reflective practice across diverse contexts. However, the review also cautions that digital tools are most effective when integrated into coherent professional learning designs rather than treated as stand-alone solutions. Hennessy (2023) work on disciplinary dialogue further emphasises the importance of structured interaction and reflection in learning processes, and this insight is relevant for teacher training programmes that increasingly rely on blended or online components to support mentoring, supervision, and professional discussion.

Khalil and Gunduz (2023) review of teacher professional development reinforces the value of inquiry-based approaches that connect professional learning to classroom practice. Their findings suggest that innovation in teacher training should prioritise sustained, reflective engagement over episodic training events. This has implications for both Cyprus and the United Kingdom, where digital learning is expanding but varies in its integration with school-based mentoring and inquiry.

#### **2.5 Community, Family Engagement, and the Educational Ecology**

Innovation in primary teacher training must also be understood within the broader ecology of education, including relationships with families and communities. Peters et al. (2007) highlight the role of parental involvement in children's education, while Lehl et al. (2020) demonstrate the significance of the home learning environment in shaping educational outcomes. These studies suggest that effective teacher preparation should equip teachers to engage meaningfully with families and communities. Harris (2025) extends this argument by emphasising partnerships with communities as a driver of teacher learning, as her work suggests that professional learning is strengthened when teachers engage beyond institutional boundaries and develop relational competencies that support inclusive and context-responsive practice. This perspective is particularly relevant in the Cypriot context, where community relationships often play a central role in school life, but it also offers a counterbalance to highly formalised training systems in the United Kingdom.

#### **2.6 Synthesis and Research Gap**

Comparative research also highlights equity concerns in teacher education, particularly regarding differential access to mentoring, professional learning, and career progression across institutional contexts (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016). Taken together, the literature highlights that innovation in teacher training is shaped by the interplay of leadership, governance, professional culture, and relational practice. While United Kingdom-based literature foregrounds

accountability, political economy, and institutional structure (Ellis et al., 2024; OFSTED, 2019a), Cyprus-focused research emphasises leadership agency, relational dynamics, and adaptive responses to uncertainty (Pashiardis, 2022; Kafa et al., 2025; Karamanidou, 2025a). However, there remains a need for comparative, qualitative research that brings these strands together and examines how stakeholders experience and enact innovation in different national settings. This study addresses that gap by exploring how teacher educators, school leaders, and trainee teachers in Cyprus and the United Kingdom understand and implement innovative approaches to teacher training, and by analysing the implications of differing governance and leadership arrangements for sustainable professional learning.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative research design to explore innovative approaches to teacher training and professional development in primary education across two national contexts: Cyprus and the United Kingdom. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables in-depth examination of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of innovation as enacted in practice. The comparative design allows for the identification of both convergences and divergences in how innovation in teacher training is understood and implemented across different governance and cultural settings. Rather than seeking direct causal comparison, the study aims to generate analytical insights into how national contexts shape training practices and professional learning processes.

#### **3.2 Participants and Sampling**

The study sample comprised 30 participants, drawn from primary education contexts in Cyprus (n=15) and the United Kingdom (n=15). Participants were purposefully selected to represent three key stakeholder groups involved in teacher preparation and professional development: 10 teacher educators, involved in initial teacher education and/or professional development programmes; 10 school leaders, including headteachers and senior leaders responsible for mentoring and professional learning; and 10 trainee teachers, enrolled in or recently completing primary teacher training programmes. Within each national context, participants were selected to ensure representation across these stakeholder groups and across different school or training settings. Participants were purposefully selected to represent key stakeholder groups involved in teacher preparation and professional development: 10 teacher educators, involved in initial teacher education and/or professional development programmes; 10 school leaders, including headteachers and senior leaders responsible for mentoring and professional learning; 10 trainee teachers, enrolled in or recently completing primary teacher training programmes.

Participants were drawn from both national contexts, ensuring representation across roles and settings. Purposeful sampling was employed to capture diverse perspectives on innovation in teacher training, particularly in relation to leadership practices, mentoring arrangements, school-based learning, and digital professional development. Participants were recruited using purposive and professional network sampling. Teacher educators were approached through university teacher education departments, while school leaders and trainee teachers were contacted through school partnerships and professional networks linked to teacher training programmes. Potential participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of participation before consenting to take part.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow participants to reflect on their experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews through a shared interview protocol.

Interview questions focused on the following areas:

- experiences of initial teacher preparation and professional development;
- perceptions of innovation in teacher training practices;
- the role of school-based placements and mentoring;
- leadership support and organisational conditions for professional learning;
- the use of digital tools and platforms for professional development;
- perceived enablers and constraints shaping innovation within each national context.
- The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to encourage reflective discussion.

Example questions included:

- *'How would you describe innovative practices in teacher training within your context?'*
- *'What role do mentoring and school placements play in shaping trainee teachers' professional development?'*
- *'How do leadership practices within schools influence opportunities for innovation in teacher training?'*
- *'What role do digital tools play in supporting professional learning?'*

These questions allowed participants to provide context-rich accounts of their experiences while enabling cross-case comparison across the two national contexts.

Interviews were conducted individually and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis. To complement interview data, a targeted document analysis was conducted to contextualise participants' accounts within national policy and governance frameworks. The document corpus included national teacher education policy documents, professional standards frameworks, and inspection guidance relevant to teacher preparation in both contexts. In the United Kingdom context, this included documents such as the Education Inspection Framework (OFSTED, 2019) and teacher training guidance materials. In the Cypriot context, relevant national policy documents and professional development frameworks were examined to understand how teacher preparation and professional learning are structured.

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were upheld throughout the research process, and participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any stage, and how the data would be used. All names and identifying details were removed during transcription. In the presentation of findings, participants are referred to using anonymised role- and country-based identifiers (e.g. Teacher Educator, Cyprus; School Leader, United Kingdom; Trainee Teacher, Cyprus). This approach protects confidentiality while allowing the reader to understand the positional context from which participants' perspectives are expressed.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, and the analysis proceeded through several iterative stages:

1. Familiarisation, involving repeated reading of transcripts to gain an overall sense of the data;
2. Initial coding, where segments of data were coded inductively to capture recurring ideas related to innovation, leadership, mentoring, and professional learning;
3. Theme development, where codes were clustered into broader themes representing shared patterns across participants;
4. Comparative analysis, examining similarities and differences across roles (teacher educators, school leaders, trainee teachers) and national contexts (Cyprus and the United Kingdom).

Themes were refined through constant comparison, ensuring that they were grounded in participants' accounts and analytically distinct, and this process enabled the identification of both convergent patterns across contexts and divergent practices shaped by national governance and leadership arrangements.

Coding was conducted using an inductive thematic analysis approach informed by Braun and Clarke (2006) framework. Initial codes were generated directly from the interview data before being refined through iterative comparison across transcripts. Codes were then grouped into higher-order themes that captured shared patterns related to innovation, governance, mentoring, and professional learning. Throughout the analysis process, themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence within themes and distinction between them. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, meaning that additional interviews were no longer generating substantially new codes or insights. Saturation was observed across stakeholder groups and national contexts, suggesting that the data were sufficient to support robust thematic analysis.

## **4. Discussion of Findings**

This section presents and critically discusses the findings and is organised around three interrelated themes that capture how innovation in teacher training is experienced and enacted in practice: (1) practice-rich, school-based preparation, (2) mentoring as professional formation, and (3) digital professional learning and its conditions for impact. Across all themes, a central comparative distinction emerged between formalised, system-embedded innovation in the United Kingdom and relationally mediated, leadership-dependent innovation in Cyprus.

### **4.1 Practice-rich Preparation and the Centrality of School-based Learning**

One trainee teacher described this shift from observation to responsibility, 'It was only when I started planning and teaching every day that I understood what a teacher being really means' (Trainee Teacher, Cyprus). Innovation was commonly framed not as curricular reform at the university level, but as the expansion and intensification of practice-rich placements that enable trainees to develop professional judgement in authentic classroom contexts.

While this convergence suggests shared pressures across systems, particularly the need for classroom readiness, the organisation and governance of school-based learning differed markedly. In the United Kingdom, participants described innovation as embedded within formal partnership structures between universities and schools, reinforced by accountability and inspection expectations (OFSTED, 2019a). Teacher educators and school leaders

frequently referred to clearly defined processes, targets, and documentation requirements that structure placement experiences. One teacher educator explained how partnership arrangements formalise learning expectations: ‘The partnership is designed so that nothing is left to chance such as progress, mentoring, and evidence are all mapped out’ (Teacher Educator, United Kingdom). This reflects broader analyses of the political economy of teacher education in England, where innovation is shaped by governance arrangements and performance logics that prioritise standardisation and auditability (Ellis et al., 2024). Such structures can ensure consistency and entitlement to learning opportunities but may also narrow professional learning to what is formally recognised.

In Cyprus, by contrast, school-based preparation was described as more relational and contingent, shaped by leadership priorities and school culture rather than uniform system requirements. One participant noted: ‘Innovation happens when a school decides to invest in the trainee, and it depends very much on the leadership and the culture’ (School Leader, Cyprus). This pattern aligns with research highlighting that Cypriot educational leadership operates within conditions of uncertainty, requiring adaptive and context-sensitive responses (Pashiardis, 2022). Kafa et al. (2025) similarly demonstrate that innovation in Cyprus often emerges through entrepreneurial leadership practices rather than system-driven reform. The findings suggest that while relational approaches can foster belonging and professional confidence, they also risk uneven provision, as access to high-quality placements depends on individual schools and leaders.

#### **4.2 Mentoring as a Process of Professional Formation**

Mentoring emerged as the most salient and emotionally charged dimension of innovation in teacher training, reflecting broader international evidence that mentoring plays a central role in shaping early-career teacher development and professional identity (Hobson et al., 2009; Menter & Flores, 2021). This was evident in trainee teachers’ accounts, and as one trainee explained: ‘Mentoring wasn’t just about improving lessons; it was about becoming a teacher and feeling that you belong’ (Trainee Teacher, United Kingdom). This relational framing resonates with leadership scholarship that emphasises wellbeing, trust, and emotional labour as central to educational improvement (Cherkowski et al., 2021). However, the form and function of mentoring varied significantly between the two contexts. In the United Kingdom, mentoring was described as highly structured and systematised. A school leader in the United Kingdom highlighted the extent of formalisation: ‘Every trainee gets mentoring; it’s timetabled, monitored, and expected’ (School Leader, United Kingdom). This formalisation reflects the broader accountability culture shaping teacher education in England (OFSTED, 2019a) and aligns with Ellis et al. (2024) argument that teacher education operates within an enterprise-oriented governance framework.

This tension echoes concerns raised by Menter and Flores (2021) regarding the impact of performativity on professional learning and research-informed practice. In Cyprus, mentoring was most often described as informal, relational, and leadership-dependent. One teacher educator stated: ‘If the principal values learning, mentoring happens. If not, new teachers are left to cope’ (Teacher Educator, Cyprus). These findings align closely with Karamanidou’s research on leadership styles, organisational barriers, and professional progression in Cyprus (Karamanidou, 2011; Karamanidou, 2017; Karamanidou & Bush, 2017). Several participants noted that mentoring could function as a gatekeeping mechanism, shaping who receives support and who is positioned for professional growth, as it was expressed that ‘Some teachers are coached and noticed; others remain invisible. Mentoring isn’t always equitable’ (School Leader, Cyprus).

Critically, this suggests that mentoring operates not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a mechanism of power and inclusion. The findings point to the need for mentoring models that combine structural guarantees with relational depth, avoiding both compliance-driven mentoring and uneven, personality-dependent support. This interpretation resonates with Karamanidou (2025b) synthesis of primary teachers' experiences in Cyprus, which highlights how differential access to mentoring and support contributes to professional vulnerability and uneven career trajectories. From a sustainability perspective, mentoring that relies solely on individual leadership goodwill risks undermining long-term system capacity (Karamanidou, 2026). The findings point to the need for mentoring models that are both relationally rich and structurally safeguarded.

### **4.3 Digital Professional Learning: Access Versus Depth**

Digital professional learning was widely perceived as an innovative expansion of teacher training and professional development, particularly following increased reliance on online platforms. Participants valued the flexibility and accessibility afforded by digital professional learning, and these perceptions are consistent with evidence that technology can extend access to professional learning and facilitate collaboration (Hennessy et al., 2022). However, participants distinguished clearly between access and impact, and digital learning was viewed as effective only when integrated with mentoring, dialogue, and classroom practice. One trainee explained: 'Watching a video isn't enough. It's the discussion afterwards that makes the learning meaningful' (Trainee Teacher, United Kingdom).

This emphasis on dialogue aligns with Hennessy (2023) work on disciplinary dialogue and learning, as well as Khalil and Gunduz (2023) argument that inquiry-oriented professional development is more effective than episodic training. Participants repeatedly stressed that digital learning without follow-up risks becoming superficial, and comparatively, United Kingdom participants described digital professional learning as more embedded within formal programme structures, whereas Cypriot participants portrayed it as expanding rapidly but operating alongside existing practices rather than being systematically integrated. Participants also contrasted the degree of system integration. One United Kingdom teacher educator stated: 'Online modules are part of the programme expectations here' (Teacher Educator, United Kingdom). By contrast, a Cypriot school leader noted: 'Digital learning depends on individual motivation; it's not always recognised or followed up' (School Leader, Cyprus). These findings reinforce the argument that digital innovation does not automatically produce professional learning. Its effectiveness depends on leadership support, collaborative culture, and alignment with mentoring structures (Sahlin, 2023). Harris (2025) emphasis on community partnerships further suggests that digital learning should be embedded within broader relational ecosystems rather than treated as a technical solution.

### **4.4 Towards Hybrid Models of Innovation in Teacher Training**

Taken together, the findings reveal a consistent comparative pattern. United Kingdom innovation is predominantly system-embedded, driven by governance, accountability, and institutional partnerships (Ellis et al., 2024; OFSTED, 2019a). Cypriot innovation, by contrast, is more relational and leadership-mediated, shaped by uncertainty and local agency (Pashiardis, 2022; Kafa et al., 2025; Karamanidou, 2025a). Neither approach is without limitation, and highly formalised systems risk narrowing professional learning to compliance, while relationally driven systems risk uneven access and sustainability. The findings therefore support the development of hybrid models that combine the United Kingdom's structured guarantees of mentoring and placement quality with Cyprus's emphasis on relational trust, adaptability, and community engagement.

Such hybrid models would also align with evidence on the broader educational ecology of primary education, recognising the role of families and communities in shaping learning (Peters et al., 2007; Lehl et al., 2020) and positioning teacher training as a socially embedded, professionally sustaining process. From the perspective of sustainable leadership, hybrid models offer a means of aligning innovation with long-term professional wellbeing and system resilience. Karamanidou (2026) argues that sustainable improvement depends on leadership practices that secure continuity, equity, and capacity development rather than episodic reform. Integrating this perspective into teacher training design suggests that innovation should be evaluated not only by its immediate impact, but by its ability to support teachers over time.

## **5. Implications**

The findings indicate that innovation in teacher training is shaped primarily by leadership, governance, and relational cultures.

### **5.1 Implications for Policymakers**

Policymakers should recognise that structured accountability and relational practice are not mutually exclusive. In the United Kingdom, accountability frameworks and inspection regimes have promoted coherence and entitlement in teacher training, particularly in relation to mentoring and school-based placements (OFSTED, 2019a; Ellis et al., 2024). However, excessive emphasis on performative indicators risks narrowing professional learning and reducing mentoring to compliance-driven activity (Menter & Flores, 2021). In Cyprus, innovation often depends on leadership agency and adaptive responses to uncertainty (Pashiardis, 2022; Kafa et al., 2025), enabling contextual responsiveness but also creating variability in access to high-quality professional support. Policymakers in smaller systems may therefore consider light-touch national frameworks that safeguard entitlement to mentoring and professional development while preserving local autonomy and relational depth (Karamanidou, 2025a).

Policy frameworks should also recognise community and family engagement as a core dimension of teacher professionalism. Evidence on parental involvement and home learning environments highlights the importance of preparing teachers to work beyond the classroom (Peters et al., 2007; Lehl et al., 2020), aligning with Harris (2025) emphasis on partnerships with communities as a source of teacher learning.

### **5.2 Implications for School Leaders**

School leaders play a critical role in shaping how innovation in teacher training is enacted in practice. The findings suggest that leaders strongly influence whether mentoring and professional learning are experienced as developmental or performative. Leaders should therefore prioritise mentoring as a relational and ethical practice, ensuring protected time, reflective dialogue, and equitable access to professional support. Research on sustainable leadership in Cyprus further suggests that such practices support not only individual teachers but also leadership succession and organisational continuity (Karamanidou, 2026). In Cyprus, where mentoring is often informal and leadership-dependent, attention to fairness and transparency is particularly important, as leadership cultures can enable or constrain professional progression (Karamanidou & Bush, 2017; Karamanidou, 2017). Leaders should also cultivate collaborative professional cultures that connect school-based learning with digital and cross-school networks. Research indicates that teachers' engagement in collaboration is shaped by how leadership is interpreted and enacted (Sahlin, 2023). Framing

innovation as collective learning rather than individual compliance is therefore more likely to support sustained professional development.

### **5.3 Implications for Teacher Educators and Training Providers**

For teacher educators, the findings reinforce the value of practice-connected and inquiry-oriented approaches to teacher training. School-based placements and mentoring should function as integrated learning processes, linking theory and practice in sustained ways (Menter & Flores, 2021; Khalil & Gunduz, 2023). Digital professional learning should be embedded within mentoring and collaborative dialogue rather than treated as a stand-alone solution, as evidence suggests its effectiveness depends on structured interaction and reflection (Hennessy et al., 2022; Hennessy, 2023). Teacher education programmes should also intentionally develop teacher leadership capacity. Positioning teachers as agents of improvement strengthens professional learning cultures and supports sustainability, particularly in contexts where leadership succession and long-term system capacity remain ongoing challenges (Harris, 2003).

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper set out to explore innovative approaches to teacher training and professional development in primary education through a qualitative, comparative analysis of Cyprus and the United Kingdom. Drawing on interviews with teacher educators, school leaders, and trainee teachers, complemented by document analysis, the study examined how innovation is experienced and enacted within differing governance and cultural contexts. A limitation is the modest sample size; however, the comparative design offers strong analytic insight. The findings reveal significant convergence across both systems in the prioritisation of practice-rich school-based preparation, mentoring, and digital professional learning. However, they also expose a fundamental divergence in how innovation is organised and sustained. In the United Kingdom, innovation is predominantly embedded through formal accountability structures, institutional partnerships, and inspection frameworks, offering coherence and entitlement but risking performativity. In Cyprus, innovation is more frequently enacted through relational leadership, community engagement, and adaptive responses to uncertainty, fostering trust and contextual fit but risking uneven provision.

The analysis suggests that neither model is sufficient in isolation. Instead, the development of hybrid approaches, combining structured guarantees with relational adaptability, offers a promising pathway for strengthening teacher training systems. Such approaches recognise that professional learning is both a systemic and a human process, requiring attention to governance, leadership, wellbeing, and community context. By foregrounding stakeholder voices and cross-national comparison, this study contributes to ongoing debates on how teacher training can be designed to support sustainable, context-sensitive innovation in primary education.

By integrating insights on teacher challenges (Karamanidou, 2025a) and sustainable leadership (Karamanidou, 2026), the study underscores that innovation in teacher training must be evaluated in terms of equity, wellbeing, and long-term professional capacity, not solely structural reform. Future research could extend this work by incorporating longitudinal data, examining the impact of hybrid models over time, and exploring how teacher training innovation intersects with issues of equity, leadership succession, and system resilience.

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