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Suitability assessments in teacher education during and post the COVID-19 pandemic – an impact on professional development

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Introduction: Suitability assessment of Norwegian pre-service teachers is carried out by teacher educators, and the mentors' professional practices play a key role in these processes. This study aims to explore how the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced suitability assessment practices of pre-service teachers. The purpose of the suitability assessment is to ensure that vulnerable groups, such as students in schools, encounter teachers who are suitable for a professional practice. The process of growing suitability includes professional development, while suitability assessment of pre-service teachers intends to strengthen the quality of teacher education programs.

Methods: Two sets of data collection methods are underpinning the arguments in this qualitative study. Data were collected in 2022 from a survey with a sample of 162 mentors in teacher education attending three universities. Thereafter, in-depth interviews were conducted with three Heads of suitability assessment from the same universities as the mentors. The triangulation aimed to reduce bias and increase the validity.

Results: The impact the pandemic has had on the suitability assessment practices is expressed in four findings: (1) a weaker basis for the assessment, (2) continuing health issues, (3) delayed professional development among pre-service teachers, and (4) differences among the universities.

Recommendations: Implications for education programs for mentoring including knowledge of the procedures of suitability assessments, and a closer collaboration between all teacher educators involving systematic evaluation of pre-service teachers are indicated for future teacher education.

KEYWORDS

suitability assessment, pre-service teachers, teacher education, professional development, mentors

Introduction

To perceive the concept of suitability assessment practices, the context must be taken into consideration (Hjelle, 2021). Suitability assessment of Norwegian pre-service teachers (PTs) intend to determine whether they have the prerequisites needed for practicing the profession and involves all students across all semesters during their education programs. Additionally, the purpose of the assessment is ensuring quality in teacher education and protecting vulnerable students in schools against unsuitable professionals (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006). The assessment was established pursuant to section 24 of the Teacher Education Act 1973. Furthermore, the first Regulation was introduced in 1999, legislated in 2006 and was amended in 2016. Teacher educators have a duty to notify their concern about PTs' suitability, in addition they have a responsibility to support PTs who have challenges in their professional behavior or

attitude (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006). All teacher education programs are obliged to have a head of suitability assessment, and if problems are identified regarding students that can be linked to the Suitability Regulations, a notification of doubt must be submitted to the head.

The process of growing suitability includes professional development (Solbrekke and Moystad, 2022), and the potential progress involves changing behavior and attitude related to the profession through mentoring. Mentors in the teacher practicum are significant in these processes, sharing professional advice and giving the PTs feedback involving the requirement of suitable behavior. However, previous research has shown that the mentors experience dilemmas when assessing and hesitate to report their doubts about PTs' suitability (Hvalby, 2022). Furthermore, COVID-19 has had an impact on students in higher education (Ivanec, 2022; NOU, 2022), and this study aims to address a gap in the existing knowledge about the processes of assessing PTs' suitability, specifically related to the pandemic. The research question for this study is:

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the suitability assessment practices of Norwegian pre-service teachers?

The first part of this paper reviews relevant previous research, in addition to national and international reports regarding PTs coping with the pandemic. Thereafter, the methodology aspect is justified, and the results of the analysis are presented. The results are illuminated and discussed according to the previous research. In the conclusion of the paper, the implications of the study are identified.

Suitability assessments in a Norwegian context

Internationally, PTs' suitability is assessed before they enter the teacher education program. However, in Norway, all students' suitability is continuously assessed across all the semesters. Teacher educators at campus and mentors in the practicum have a joint responsibility to assess the PTs. The Norwegian model of continuously assessment of PTs' suitability is founded on eight criteria in the legislative regulations concerning the students' abilities and willingness to practice a professional teacher role (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006). The regulations states that a PT who poses a potential danger to students' lives, physical and mental health, or threatens their rights or safety is not suitable to become a teacher. However, a vagueness in the criteria has been reported (Naustdal and Gabrielsen, 2015; Langorgen et al., 2018) and there is a concern if PTs are certified without the required skills for the profession.

A recent study explored the mentors' experiences of assessing future nurses' suitability (Natterøy et al., 2023). One of the mentors' dilemmas was related to the challenge to know when worrying behavior was caused by immaturity, that could be developed throughout the student's education, or when a student ought to be removed from the education program. The mentors also struggled with the concept of suitability and the lack of support. This aligns with another study, which mapped the mentors' knowledge of suitability assessment in teacher education (Hvalby, 2022). The mentors' understanding of the criteria in the regulations and the procedures varied. Furthermore, the disposable time for supporting students was experienced to be limited, and many

mentors struggled to meet the responsibility facing solitude in balancing legislation, assessments, and professional dilemmas. Consequently, there are indications that practices of suitability assessment in higher education require change (Tam et al., 2018).

A case study revealed how to implement a template to support students in becoming professionally suitable (Solbrekke and Moystad, 2022). Educators in practicum and at campus had close collaboration and gradually changed their assessment practices by using systematic evaluation of the students. The results from this study showed the complexity in the practices, which involved change in the structural and cultural work. One of the prerequisites for success was that the change progressed over time involving all actors in the organization. Nevertheless, nationally, and internationally, there still is a need for developing good suitability assessment practices (Garner et al., 2016; Munthe et al., 2020; Hvalby, 2022).

The purpose of mentoring in teacher education is to facilitate the PTs' learning and development thus mentors play a significant role in shaping the PT's professional identity (Hvalby and Thortveit, 2022). Developing suitability involves the ability or willingness to change behavior and attitude related to the profession (Solbrekke and Moystad, 2022), and an example is to obtain self-insight related to future professional role. This process is part of professional development and through mentoring the PTs practice reflecting and thinking critically when they analyze their actions (Carroll, 2010; Rankine, 2018).

The living conditions of students in higher education during the pandemic

Various factors influence students' standard of living, which furthermore may affect the process of becoming suitable for the profession and thereby influencing the suitability assessment practices. The living conditions of Norwegian students in higher education were mapped in 2022, and the results highlighted study climate, physical and mental health, housing and living conditions, employment, and financial situations (Statistics Norway, 2022). A total of 81% had income from part-time jobs while studying, and 48% had experienced some financial problems. Furthermore, the report stated that 69% of the students had good health, and young students living alone were at risk. Almost 50% of the students reported that they to some extents were struggling mentally and that they felt lonely. These findings are in line with conclusions from similar reports, which pointed out that a global effect of the pandemic is a concern for the mental health of students (NOU, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

In the USA, many students in higher education returned to family homes due to the pandemic, and lost the autonomy, they were used to when living independently (Furman and Moldwin, 2021). Furthermore, they suffered from social isolation related to fellow students. However, their institutions presumed that they kept to academic schedules as usual. Many of these students felt stressed, and incapable of dealing with the endless pandemic protocols. These findings agree with results from other studies, which revealed that absence of social interactions in an academic context affected the students' academic functioning (Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Ivanec, 2022). In addition, many of the PTs had to do their practicum virtually and had few hours of real interaction with students and teachers, and this negatively influenced their professional development (Flores and Gago, 2020).

Online mentoring of PTs in the pandemic was explored in a Turkish study, which showed that the contextual support provided by the mentors was sufficient, and most of the PTs were positive to the virtual mentoring (Ersin and Atay, 2021). Nevertheless, experiences emphasized by the PTs were limited professional support and lack of time in the supervision sessions.

Methodology

The data sets underpinning the arguments in this qualitative study were a survey that used questionnaires to map mentors' experiences of suitability assessment during and post the pandemic, and in-depth interviews with three heads of suitability assessment at three different institutions. The mixed-method approach enables for a comprehensive investigation of the research question and provides a nuanced understanding of the topic (Denzin, 2017). Hence, the study is enriched by including viewpoints from both mentors and heads of suitability assessment. This involvement of multiple stakeholders' perspectives enhances the depth of the analysis and offers a holistic perspective on the subject.

The study had a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011), where qualitative and quantitative data on how the COVID-19 pandemic had influenced suitability practices of Norwegian PTs were collected and analyzed separately. Then the results from the survey were converged with the findings in the interviews during interpretation.

The grounding of the survey was based on the Suitability Regulations, which sets procedures and requirements for suitability assessment practices. Furthermore, the questionnaire consisted of five open-ended questions, which were pilot tested for clarity and relevance, and developed to gain insight into how mentors met suitability assessments during extremely difficult conditions and to provide knowledge about the development of good practices in the assessment.

Due to the duty of confidentiality, it was initially specified in the form that there must not be information that can identify PTs in the answers, especially because of the sensitivity in suitability assessment. The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research granted ethical permission for the data collection, additionally the research followed the guidelines of [The National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities \(NESH\)](#) (2018). The survey was anonymous, and the respondents' e-mail or IP address could not be connected to individual responses. To recruit a mix of participants with regards to gender, age, professional experience in mentoring, and experience with suitability assessment, criterion sampling was performed (Denzin, 2017). A selection of all mentors employed at three universities registered with PTs in practicum was made in the fall of 2022. A total of 242 mentors at 92 primary and lower secondary schools were approached by e-mail and informed about the survey, that the participation was voluntary, and they were provided a link to the questionnaire. Regarding surveys for data collection, response rates can be a barrier (Creswell and Guetterman, 2019), nevertheless a total of 162 respondents ($n = 162$) replied to the survey, which indicates a response rate of 67%.

Thematic content analysis was performed on the data from the open-ended questions (Braun and Clarke, 2019), and the coded answers were thematized and linked to factors the mentors experienced had affected the suitability assessment practices during and post the pandemic.

Three heads of suitability assessment were sampled based on the criteria that they were affiliated at the same universities as the mentors, namely criterion sampling (Denzin, 2017). In-depth interviews were performed with these informants, and the interview guide was semi-structured with open questions similar to the questionnaire responded by the mentors. Furthermore, the guide was developed to gain insight into the heads' experiences related to suitability assessment and how they dealt with any changes in their practices throughout and after COVID-19. In addition to the informants' narratives, there was a strive for alignment between the research question, the method of approach, reflexivity, and the quality in the data, which intended to add credibility to the study (Moser and Korstjens, 2018).

The tentative process of the inductive thematic analysis reflected a bottom-up procedure with no pre-arranged codes, and it started from the specific and developed to the general. The empirical material was organized through thematic analysis in the following three phases inspired by Braun and Clarke (2021): (1) grouping the data and classifying codes, (2) pursuing themes and patterns, and (3) identifying main themes by interpreting the findings.

The first phase of the analysis was to compress the transcripts grouping the data and classifying codes in both the data sets. Furthermore, the transcripts were imported to NVivo to organize the data systematically. In the second phase of the analysis, the codes were grouped into potential themes which were identified through the informants' responds to the interview questions or the open-ended questions in the survey. During the coding and theme development, constructed from the informants' formulations; candidate themes were compared to coded data and retraced to the original datasets. The third phase of the analysis involved identifying main themes by interpreting the findings, confirming that the themes did not coincide. From the interviews with the heads of suitability assessment two main themes derived: (1) barriers to the assessment and (2) challenges faced by PTs during and after the pandemic. Further, four themes were identified from the open-ended questions responded by the mentors: (1) a weaker basis for the assessment, (2) continuing health issues, (3) delayed professional development among pre-service teachers, and (4) differences among the universities.

All themes were validated by presenting them to a peer for debriefing and verification.

The research design consisted of two data collection methods with a qualitative approach, in which triangulation can validate the analysis by checking that various methods of the same phenomenon provide similar results (Denzin, 2017). The rationale behind employing triangulation was to reduce potential biases and limitations in the data material from the in-depth interviews and the surveys. To perform a triangulation, the analysis process was circular, in which key findings from the two data sets were sorted, compared, and contrasted to make a holistic interpretation. Further, the similar key findings were grouped. This produced understandings and new knowledge of how the pandemic has affected the suitability assessment practices of PTs.

Results from the survey – the mentors' voices

The data from the five questions in the survey illuminate the research question and provide the basis for mapping the mentors' practices in suitability assessment. The first question addressed the mentors' experiences of emphasizing suitability assessment in

practicum during and post the pandemic. 158 mentors responded to this question and the results showed that the focus of the majority from all three universities was comparable to how the mentors highlighted suitability assessment prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, 19 mentors mentioned that even though they tried to highlight the assessment, the extreme conditions made the assessment difficult to perform, which continued to affect the suitability assessment practices even after the crisis.

The second question asked if the respondents had experienced any change in the amount of their reporting of doubts about PTs' suitability during and post the pandemic. All 162 mentors responded, and there was significant variation in the responses from the three universities, which is illustrated in [Table 1](#).

The results showed that there was a considerable decrease in informing about concerns related to suitability in one of the universities, whereas the two other institutions had an increase in reporting doubts. The following factors were very frequently mentioned to have had an impact on this difference: Variation across local regions, different routines for the assessment among the institutions, and inability to follow up the PTs. However, the growth in cases related to PTs' health issues were mentioned by the majority of all the respondents. Mentor 6 expressed: "Several of the pre-service teachers clearly struggle with health issues and loneliness, and this has continued after the pandemic. Nevertheless, they do not talk about it. I think they feel they are expected to just move on."

In the third question of the survey, the mentors were asked to list the criteria most frequently used in the assessments of PTs' suitability during and after the pandemic, and all 162 mentors responded. There are eight criteria in the regulations ([Ministry of Education and Research, 2006](#)), and [Table 2](#) illustrates the mentors' and heads of suitability assessment's responses.

Several of the mentors pointed out that some of the criteria were overlapping, for example, when PTs had problems of such a nature that they functioned poorly in relation to their surroundings, self-insight got challenging, and potentially the ability to communicate and cooperate became more difficult for these individuals.

The fourth question in the survey addressed possible changes in the mentors' practices in suitability assessment during and post the pandemic. 153 mentors responded, and the most frequently mentioned changes were related to barriers, which led to a weaker basis for the assessment: challenging working conditions, prioritizing other professional tasks, limited time, virtual mentoring with lack of emotional connection, and fewer opportunities for interaction in the classrooms. Mentor 12 revealed: "I have had to focus on the students and making the school days go by as professionally as possible for a long time. In my opinion, that cast a shadow over assessing the pre-service teachers." Many of the mentors commented on how they had to prioritize other professional tasks, and Mentor 133 responded: "The consequences of the total workload under these circumstances have been less time for supervision and assessing the pre-service teachers. In my experience, they continuously want more feedback than I can give."

In the final question in the survey, the mentors were encouraged to elaborate on their perceptions of pre-service teachers' professional development during and post the pandemic. 119 mentors responded and various factors were mentioned: lack of professional skills and competence, immaturity, low degree of self-insight, lack of critical thinking, and limited opportunities to practice. This is outlined by mentor 112:

TABLE 1 Allocation of answers to questions related to reporting doubts about PTs' suitability.

	An increase in reporting doubts	Same number in reporting doubts	A decrease in reporting doubts
University A	1 (3%)	23 (48%)	24 (49%)
University B	30 (54%)	22 (39%)	4 (7%)
University C	29 (49%)	24 (42%)	5 (9%)
Total	60	69	33

TABLE 2 Allocation of answers to questions related to the most frequently used criteria.

	§3 e) PTs' problems of such a nature that they function very poorly in relation to their surroundings	§3 f) PTs' lack of self-insight related to future professional role	§3 d) PTs' lack of ability to communicate and cooperate
University A	24 (49%)	17 (36%)	7 (15%)
University B	24 (43%)	18 (33%)	14 (24%)
University C	24 (41%)	18 (31%)	16 (28%)
Total	72	53	37

For the last two semesters, I have had several pre-service teachers in their third year of their studies who have lacked the expected skills or competence. Due to the pandemic, they first missed out on one period in the practicum and told me that the supervision in the next period had been inadequate due to COVID-related absence among both the mentors and teachers at the practice school.

In the analysis, the results from the mentors' responses were addressed in the following four themes: (1) a weaker basis for the assessment, (2) continuing health issues, (3) delayed professional development among pre-service teachers, and (4) differences among the universities.

Results from the interviews – the heads' voices

From the interviews with the heads of suitability assessment the process of the analysis developed interpreted data, which addressed how the pandemic affected the suitability assessment practices. In the active research process, two main themes were developed from the analysis, namely (1) barriers to the assessments and (2) Challenges faced by PTs during and after the pandemic.

Barriers to the suitability assessment

All the heads of suitability assessment addressed the perspective of challenges in the assessment during the pandemic. Head A stated:

“There was an increased absence among the pre-service teachers because they were ill or had a fear of contracting the virus and testing positive.” All the interviewees talked about how absences among the teachers and mentors also escalated due to the pandemic, and therefore the mentors had to prioritize other professional tasks than suitability assessment.

In my institution there has been a decrease in mentors reporting doubts about pre-service teachers’ suitability. I believe the mentors had enough on their plates when schools were closed for a period, and then digitalized. This has led to a continuously underreporting and is just a delay in the processes of suitability assessment. We are also working with a change in the assessment practices (Head A).

The digitalization was mentioned by all the heads of suitability assessment as a barrier for the assessment, and Head B pointed out: “There were fewer interactions between the pre-service teachers and the students because of considerations related to infection control, and that is a concern.” This matter was also commented on by many of the mentors as a negative influence. However, two mentors described some PTs who frequently missed out on discussions in the practicum, but who took more active part during the pandemic when the mentoring was performed through digital platforms.

The heads of suitability assessment were asked if they had experienced any change in the amount of reporting of doubts about PTs’ suitability during and post the pandemic. They all talked about different actors not being close enough to the PTs for a longer period due to the pandemic, which they believed led to an underreporting of questioning suitability in 2020 and 2021. However, head B and head C, both experienced an increase in reporting doubts in 2022 because of this delay. Head A had experienced a decrease in the number of cases from the start of the outbreak until the fall semester in 2022 and elaborated that there was an underreporting of cases due to immediate lock down during the outbreak, in which had lasted longer than in other institutions in other parts of the country. In addition, University A had started a process of changing their routines related to suitability assessment, which in the head’s opinion had an impact on the decreasing number of cases. The question involving potential change in the amount of reporting doubts was also asked of the mentors in the survey to underline their experience. The triangulation revealed compliance among the heads of suitability assessment and the mentors within the universities.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, the heads of suitability assessment all expressed worries for the PTs’ professional development and concerns for the mentors’ suitability assessment practices. Head C claimed: “There was a reduced amount of time in the practical training in two or three periods, and in my judgement, this has affected the pre-service teachers’ professional development as well as the quality in teacher education.”

Challenges faced by PTs during and after the pandemic

Reporting doubts about PTs’ suitability involves setting the criteria in the Regulations in motion (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006). In the interviews, the heads were encouraged to describe the most frequently used criteria during and post the pandemic, and the

three most used were related to PTs with problems of such a nature that they functioned very poorly to their surroundings, those who lacked self-insight related to future professional role, and those with limited ability to communicate and cooperate. There was coherence among the mentors and the heads of suitability assessment from each university concerning the criteria that were most used (see Table 2).

All the heads of suitability assessment emphasized at-risk PTs who appeared to be vulnerable and struggling in their studies prior to the pandemic and who became even more vulnerable when the framework of both their studies at campus and their practical training were different and reduced. “I think the learning outcomes during the pandemic demanded an increased amount of independence,” Head C pointed out. At the same time, there are examples in the findings in this study of PTs who previously had not experienced any difficulties but due to the pandemic, they were influenced in a negative way. Head B stated: “I have had conversations with pre-service teachers who were isolated for a longer period and who experienced a total lack of social interaction. That has an impact on the state of mind.”

All the heads of suitability assessment also mentioned economic conditions as a factor that influenced the PTs during and after the pandemic. Hence, they were worrying about not having an extra income when the schools or firms they worked for had to close or reduce their staff.

The heads also talked about their post-pandemic experiences of encounters with PTs who had severe health issues. Head A expressed: “I can see a change. In my practice, I meet low-functioning students who need healthcare much more often than prior to the pandemic.” Head C pointed out the potential implication of these vulnerable PTs: “Something must be done with the system. The institution’s waiting list for healthcare has increased, and we have few other offers to support the pre-service teachers.”

Discussion – effects of the pandemic on suitability assessment practices

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the suitability assessment practices, and in this study, there are four findings related to: (1) a weaker basis for the assessment, (2) continuing health issues, (3) delayed professional development among pre-service teachers, and (4) differences among the universities.

A weaker basis for the assessment

The mentors and the heads of suitability assessment described challenging working conditions with an increased absence among both the PTs and the mentors during the pandemic. Some PTs were virtually mentored, and several of the mentors mentioned the lack of emotional and personal connection that usually are a foundation in their relationship building. This is in line with Ersin and Atay (2021), who pointed out that the quality of online mentoring was characterized by limited professional support and less supervision. Furthermore, there is a concern if PTs pass their practical training without the required skills or competence (Hvalby, 2022). The results from the current study revealed fewer opportunities for interaction in the classrooms, and the respondents highlighted that the basis for the assessment of the PTs was weaker. The mentors’ responsibility to

continuously assess the PTs' suitability should be addressed when PTs continue to pass their practicum without achieving required progress in their professional skills. However, suitability assessment is a shared responsibility in teacher education, and a closer cooperation between the teacher educators in the field of practice and at campus is required. Thus, there is a call for changing suitability assessment practices in several professional programs to emphasize this responsibility competently (Solbrekke and Moystad, 2022).

Delay in professional development

Supervision may shape students' professional development (Carroll, 2010; Rankine, 2018; Hvalby and Thortveit, 2022), but there is a strong concern if PTs with severe challenges in their suitable behavior is not being reported before they are late in their studies. Two of the heads of suitability assessment mentioned dialogues with mentors who were disturbed by the PTs' lack of skills and competence in the practicum during and after the pandemic. Several mentors also commented on this issue related to PTs who did not have the professional competence that was expected from third-year students. These findings match the results from Flores and Gago (2020), which concluded that the PTs' professional development was negatively affected by the pandemic.

A criterion frequently used in the assessments was §3 f) in the regulations (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006) regarding PTs' lack of self-insight related to their future professional role. The process of becoming suitable for the profession involves professional development including suitable attitude (Solbrekke and Moystad, 2022). Hence, developing self-insight may be a continuum related to each students' professional development. However, the findings in this study reveal that several PTs lacked this ability, and the pandemic may have had a negative impact on some of them concerning this matter. This is in line with results from other studies showing that the pandemic affected the academic functioning of students in higher education (Flores and Gago, 2020; Ersin and Atay, 2021; Chaturvedi et al., 2021; Ivanec, 2022). Another issue related to professional development in this study, concerns reflecting and thinking critically, which is fundamental in supervision including obtaining an overview and analyzing actions (Carroll, 2010; Rankine, 2018). Furthermore, the mentors' mandate is to facilitate the PTs' learning and development in the practicum (Hvalby and Thortveit, 2022), however, for a long period the mentors have had to prioritize other professional tasks. In addition, the PTs have had limited opportunities to practice and develop professional skills. A delay in their professional development influences the suitability assessment practices, because the PTs are expected to show progress and achieve the learning outcomes related to suitability within a certain period, although they may be in different stages on their professional development paths.

Continuing health issues

In the interviews with the heads of suitability assessment and in several of the responses from the surveys, the findings showed that the pandemic had a severe impact on at-risk PTs when the framework in their education suddenly changed. Nevertheless, the findings also indicate that there were PTs who before the pandemic seemed resilient,

but who became vulnerable after experiencing isolation and a lack of social interaction with fellow students, friends, and family. Furthermore, the heads of suitability assessment claimed that the institutions in this study developed learning outcomes that demanded an increased amount of independence from the PTs. These findings are consistent with the results of other studies and reports of students in higher education during the pandemic (Furman and Moldwin, 2021; Ivanec, 2022; Statistics Norway, 2022). In addition, economic conditions and being anxious about not having an extra income became a risk factor for the Norwegian PTs in the current study. Hence, most of them worked in addition to their studies, and many became unemployed when their workplace was affected by the pandemic. According to the mentors and heads of suitability assessments, poor health due to financial concerns among PTs have continued even after the pandemic. This affects the suitability assessment practices because there is an increase in the number of cases where there are doubts about the PTs' suitability. Furthermore, these cases are difficult to assess both for the mentors and the heads, as health problems constitute a complex factor in the assessment.

Several PTs also experienced fear of the virus, and all these factors may have influenced the PTs' mental health. Furthermore, for some PTs the pandemic may also have intensified these problems because access to health care was more difficult during the outbreak. These findings are supported by national and international reports (NOU, 2022; UNESCO, 2022) that revealed that students in higher education had health issues related to the pandemic. The findings also showed that the most frequent criterion in the suitability assessment at all three universities was §3 e) in the regulations (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006), which relates to when PTs have problems of such a nature that they function very poorly to their surroundings. However, temporary health issues do not mean that the PT is unsuitable to become a teacher. Nevertheless, these cases may involve the student taking a leave of absence from the studies to recover. Consequently, if PTs insist on continuing their studies while they are unwell, the matter of suitability must be discussed.

Findings in this study showed that mentors noticed loneliness among the PTs during the pandemic, which included an academic solitude involving demands for professional feedback and support. Similar results are found in other studies related to students in higher education (NOU, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). However, the mentors and the heads also addressed the PTs' current health issues, which, in their experience, were continuing after the pandemic. The difference and a concern were that the PTs rarely articulated their challenges post the pandemic, which the respondents believed was because the crisis was over, and thus an expectation that everyone had to move on. This issue affected the suitability assessment practices, because there was limited time to build trust so the PTs could be open about their challenges. In addition, both the mentors and the heads requested an available mental health service and an academical support system, in which they could refer PTs in need.

Differences among the universities

The last key finding indicates that there was variation between university A, where fewer mentors experienced to inform their concerns about PTs' suitability, whereas universities B and C experienced a significant increase in reporting their doubts (Table 1). This was in accordance with the experiences of the heads of suitability assessments,

and there are several and complex reasons for this. One of them is variation across local regions. In Norway, different parts of the country were affected by the pandemic to varying degrees (NOU, 2022). In some counties, universities had strict restrictions for a long time, while others were less influenced by the pandemic. Several PTs returned to their family homes and lost some of the autonomy they were used to having, while others were isolated and lonely in their accommodation trying to manage shifting pandemic protocols. These findings are supported by results from other studies and reports (Furman and Moldwin, 2021; Ivanec, 2022; Statistics Norway, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

Another reason for the variation was the different routines for suitability assessments among the institutions (Naustdal and Gabrielsen, 2015), and these procedures were maintained in the practices throughout the pandemic. Furthermore, mentors reported that they had to prioritize other professional issues in the practicum even before COVID-19 (Hvalby, 2022), and during and after the pandemic it became even more difficult to find time for assessing the PTs' suitability. In addition, several educators experienced solitude navigating professional dilemmas and assessments. How can two universities have a significant increase in the number of reports of doubt when the mentors report less time to observe, assess, and supervise the students? The two heads of suitability assessment (head B and head C) were unanimous, in their experiences the numbers were higher because neither the mentors nor the heads were able to follow up the PTs in practicum during the pandemic as well as they used to. The fact that both the mentoring and the lectures were digitalized, and the institutions had distance to the PTs over a long period led to an underreporting in 2020 and 2021, and therefore an increase in 2022. However, head A explained the decrease with a continuously underreporting also in 2022, because the mentors and the schools were still influenced by the aftermath of the pandemic. Nevertheless, in this head's point of view, the increase was just a delay in the processes of suitability assessment, in addition, a change in the practices was impending.

All these factors affect the difference among the institutions in reporting doubts about suitability. Nevertheless, in addition to causal hypotheses, it is of significance to consider the statistical phenomenon, which claims that changes often occur randomly in small samples (Thomson, 2011). Variation between three universities may indicate that the respondents' perceptions related to changes in the number of PTs where there was doubt about suitability were random during the period. Adding more universities to the sample might have increased the validity and generalizability, particularly concerning the diversity in the practice of suitability assessment among the institutions (Naustdal and Gabrielsen, 2015).

Finally, it all depends on the context, and how each individual PT, mentor, or head of suitability assessment has experienced and dealt with the pandemic and its aftermath varies from person to person and from situation to situation. Thus, it is difficult to determine who have suffered the most consequences.

Limitations

To add transparency to the research process, constant reflexivity was required to reduce potential biases that might affect the research (Denzin, 2017). The researcher's background as a mentor and head of suitability assessment made the context familiar, however, the professional background may have influenced the researcher's preconceptions. To

minimize biases that may have had an impact on the interpretation due to the researcher's subjective perspectives, the presumptions were bracketed having a peer acquainted with the phenomenon explored.

The samples of this study do not include PTs, therefore there are no data of their experiences nor perceptions related to suitability assessment during and after the pandemic. This may be a limiting factor, because such material could have provided the basis for a greater dynamic in the data. Nevertheless, highlighting the suitability assessment practices as experienced by the mentors and the heads, give insight and knowledge of different perspectives, and may provide to develop suitability assessment practices further.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to contribute more knowledge of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the suitability assessment practices of PTs. The pandemic has had an impact on these processes because of limited time for interaction in the classroom during the practicum, and the supervision sessions have varied in quality and extent. An implication of the current study generates a hypothesis that limited time between mentors and PTs in general is a challenge for suitability assessment. When circumstances, also after the pandemic, lead to less time, more digital and reduced direct interaction between the mentors and the PTs during the practicum, this may question the validity of suitability assessment.

The mentors' role in suitability assessments in the field of practice is significant. Formal mentor competence influences the quality in the mentoring, and an implication of this study is that education programs for mentoring should include learning outcomes related to knowledge of the procedures for suitability assessments. Many Norwegian mentors in the teacher education practicum have formal competence in mentoring; however, it should be addressed that some mentors may not have completed their official training and therefore lack practice regarding suitability assessment. Hence, they should be offered to participate in a mentoring team, a community of practice, for support and professional development.

Good framework conditions, where the mentors are released from other professional tasks when they are assessing PTs, will enable them to concentrate on learning and development. Collaboration between all teacher educators involving systematically evaluation of PTs can strengthen the quality in the processes of suitability assessment (Solbrekke and Moystad, 2022). This applies in particular to the follow-up of vulnerable PTs, who need a professional support system involving mental health service and academic support. Furthermore, mentors and teacher educators should give PTs access to the new narrative post the COVID-19 pandemic, related to how to succeed as a student in higher education. This includes discussions and reflections of how to achieve professional competence and develop suitability for the teacher role.

This study has relevance for educational research because there is a need to collect knowledge about how teacher educators can develop good suitability assessments practices and thus strengthen the quality in teacher education.

Suitability assessment of PTs is a joint responsibility, and an avenue for further research is to address teacher educators on campus and to explore their experiences of the pandemic's influence on their assessments of PTs' suitability. Longitudinal research that explores the long-term effects of the pandemic on suitability assessments practices

might also provide knowledge that could influence the quality in teacher education.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

MH contributed to conception and design of the study, organized the database, and performed the analysis. Furthermore, MH has written the manuscript, revised, and approved the submitted version.

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