

Australian Government Initial Teacher Education Review

Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) submission

July 2021

1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Australia (**Aspect**) welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to the Quality Initial Teacher Education (**QITE**) Review 2021.

Aspect is Australia's largest autism-specific service provider, with one of the biggest autism-specific schools programs in the world. A not-for-profit organisation, our mission is to work with people on the autism spectrum of all ages to deliver evidence-informed, person-centred solutions. All of our work is focussed on understanding, engaging and celebrating the strengths, interests and aspirations of people on the autism spectrum.

In providing the following responses to the QITE discussion paper we have answered the sections that have the most relevance to our expertise, work and services in a Special Education context.

2. Part A - Attracting high-quality candidates into ITE matters

Q.3 Have you experienced teacher shortages?

Yes. Several factors are driving the special education teacher shortage, in particular teachers with specific expertise in Autism, these include a steep decline in the number of enrolments in teacher education programs, meaning fewer credentialed teachers are available for a growing number of vacancies. Special education teachers are also leaving teaching at much greater rates than even those of the general teacher education cohort. Working conditions, low pay, and insufficient training are significant contributing factors also.

In our particular setting special education teachers work in highly stressful environments related to the complex learning needs of Autistic students. Teachers need to deal with a range of challenges such as requirement for higher levels of parental involvement, student absenteeism, and a lack of specialised resources.

Growing administrative demands and overwhelming workloads that require comprehensive individualized education programs, regular testing, regular meetings with parents and others (e.g. treating professionals) are turning potential candidates away from teaching in a special education context.

Are there examples of incentives that have successfully worked to attract quality teachers in areas of shortage? How could these be rolled out more broadly?

Aspect has found financial initiatives can work to fill hard-to-staff positions such as special education or more specifically teaching in our Autism specific setting. Retention payments for remaining in more complex roles and settings for a set period of time can also provide a retention incentive.

To support ongoing quality professional learning and to assist in the incentivisation of teachers to this field, Aspect believes that the provision of a comprehensive one-year professional learning program - including accreditation in autism by completing a Graduate Certificate - would build on teachers' existing expertise, develop their confidence and capability to deliver high quality learning experiences for students with autism and may work to successfully attract more teaching staff to these roles.

3. Part B - ITE program completions and entry into a teaching career

Q.4 Are graduating teachers ready for the classroom?

Are the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Teacher Standards) fit for purpose in identifying the key skills and knowledge pre-service teachers need to be ready for the classroom?

No. The inclusive education framework and the increase in autism diagnoses have led to an overwhelming challenge for pre-service teachers who need to be qualified to teach all children.

Due to the increased prevalence of students identified as having Autism, it is more likely that pre-service educators will work with students who have autism, both in the general education classrooms and in more specialised settings, like Aspect.

Most initial teacher education programs do not adequately prepare teachers to work in special education environments and in particular with students on the spectrum. In Australia, teachers, specialists, and parents have identified a lack of specific staff training as a key barrier to the effective education of students on the autism spectrum (*Saggers et al., 2016*). Similarly, in a review of stakeholder perspectives on inclusive education for students on the autism spectrum - educators, parents, and autistic adults identified a need for additional training for

staff, to better support the inclusion of this student cohort (*Roberts & Simpson, 2016*).

Teachers need to have a comprehensive knowledge of autism as a necessary component however there is an absence of widespread use of evidence-based practices for those teaching students on the autism spectrum. There are huge training gaps in areas such as behaviour management, adjustments, special education and in the current climate, mandatory training in Autism 101. The lack of knowledge about the specific strategies to teach language and communication skills to students on the autism spectrum is also missing from current training programs. There is a pressing need for autism specific courses to become mandatory for pre-service educators, but this is rarely included in compulsory core studies, and needs to be selected as an elective course.

The consequence of not providing appropriate training/support for teachers of students in mainstream and special education settings is the increasing number of students of autistic students being home-schooled. A report on home-schooling by Aspect, (*July 2018, Brook, S., & Cheney, L. 'Educating children on the autism spectrum at home: Reasons, requirements and recommendations'*) highlights that for some parents, the traditional education system is simply unable to provide an individualised, safe and supportive learning environment.

Teachers should not be expected to enter the profession without being trained with the necessary skills and knowledge to manage the complexity of teaching students on the autism spectrum. Having one or two teachers trained in the complexities of autism at any one school is no longer a sufficient contingency for ensuring students are effectively supported. Nor is attendance at a one-day, one-off course. Developing carefully considered content for pre service teachers, including an improvement in educator performance, should result in better outcomes for students on the autism spectrum.

Do the current professional experience arrangements support the preparation of ITE students for the classroom and school environment? How could these be improved? & How can professional experience be delivered in a more efficient way for school systems and higher education providers?

More time needs to be invested in classrooms and school environments to effectively prepare pre service teachers to become quality Special Education teachers, particularly in complex special education settings, such as schools for students on the autism spectrum. *"It is important that professional learning in disability inclusive education for both pre-service and practising general education teachers will have a demonstrated positive impact on student outcomes"* (Julie McMillan et al., 2018)

Real-time coaching has the potential to address the gap from theory to practice. More time in schools applying practice knowledge, more mentoring, and more

partnerships with special schools would expose pre service teachers to the reality of teaching in special settings.

All pre service teachers should spend mandatory time in special school settings. Centres of Excellence that collaboratively engage pre service teachers in internship-like programs would also increase the opportunities for teachers to be closely supported during training. For reference, the Australian Autism CRC education research projects provide a rich source of evidence-based resources and professional development for Australian teachers in mainstream settings, while the 'Models of Practice' lead by the Aspect Research Centre for Autism Practice involved evidence-based teaching strategies/practices to better support the inclusion of students on the autism spectrum. (*Models of Practice to support the transition of students on the autism spectrum into and between Early and Middle Years classrooms*' Trevor Clark, Wendi Beamish, Susan Bruck, Vicki Gibbs, Ainslie Robinson, Emma Gallagher, Annalise Taylor & Libby Macdonald December 2019)