

July 2021

Quality Initial Teacher Education Review

ENQUIRIES

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A. INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

La Trobe University welcomes the opportunity to participate in this consultation.

La Trobe has a long history of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provision. Our ITE courses are offered across all La Trobe's campuses in Melbourne and regional Victoria. Hundreds of teachers have graduated from La Trobe over the years. In regional Victoria, the majority of our graduates are employed in regional Schools and have become a mainstay of the regional teaching workforce. For example, in Mildura, around 85% of our graduates are employed in the community. This year's graduation (which brought together the 2019 and 2020 cohorts) saw 44 teachers going into Sunraysia and surrounding district communities.

In this submission, we highlight the work that La Trobe has undertaken as an ITE provider to make innovative changes to its teacher education courses. In particular, we believe that our **Nexus programme**, an alternate employment-based pathway program that seeks to build long-term relationships with hard-to-staff schools, has significant potential to be expanded. Similarly, the work taking place in our **Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR)Lab** is not only helping to prepare our current students in evidence-based approaches to the science of learning and reading but also simultaneously helping to upskill existing teachers. Beyond the work we do in our institution, we work in tandem with other ITE providers with the aim of pursuing excellence in ITE across the sector. In particular, our work with other Higher education institutions on the Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment (GTPA) should go a long way towards strengthening public (and indeed Government's) confidence in the quality of teacher education in Australia.

We are constantly monitoring developments in the research relating to optimal outcomes in ITE and look forward to working with the Department and the rest of the sector towards an even more evidence-based ITE curriculum. That said, we submit that some of the challenges relating to attrition in ITE courses, as well as in the teaching profession, are not necessarily linked to ITE but require other changes in policy settings both at state and federal level which are beyond universities' control. **While teacher supply is an issue of immediate concern, we would caution against rushed, untested solutions and would rather recommend a focus on teacher education programs and pathways that are already proving their worth.**

Our response to this Review's Terms of Reference is included in Section C while further information about La Trobe's Nexus programme and SOLAR lab is attached. La Trobe looks forward to working with the Panel on this Review and can provide further information as requested. With regard to the Nexus programme in particular, and its upcoming external evaluation, we look forward to providing more detail about the innovative changes that we have made to our programs to support career changes into this employment-based pathway.

This submission is structured as follows:

- A. Introduction and Executive Summary
- B. Key Recommendations
- C. Response to Terms of Reference

B. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Increase investment in alternative pathways to teaching including through the Government's High Achieving Teaching Program to create a broader pipeline of high quality teaching professionals and to further entice career changers to teach in high-need areas.**
 - a. **With regard to La Trobe's Nexus program in particular, consider the potential of the program to expand its reach through supporting a national rollout with a focus on regional, rural and**

remote schools. As a regional ITE provider, La Trobe is well-placed to deliver such an expansion.

b. Extend Nexus to Catholic and Independent School sectors

2. **Enable and incentivise partnerships between the profession, schools and early learning centres to increase mentoring, career progression and retention.**
3. **Commission further research on the various reasons leading to teacher attrition in Australia**
4. **In order to attract a more diverse cohort into ITE, consider setting up alternate ITE pathways that are specifically geared towards underrepresented cohorts such as Indigenous and migrant cohorts to enable them to enter the profession, keeping in mind that the requirement of a Bachelor award prior to undertaking a Master of Teaching is one of the major obstacles for underrepresented cohorts.**
5. **Promote and ensure quality in professional development by identifying specific university offerings, including short courses, graduate certificates, graduate diplomas and master programs, that are declared to satisfy professional development requirements under teacher registration.**

C. RESPONSE TO REVIEW'S TERMS OF REFERENCE

Part A - Attracting and selecting high-quality candidates into the teaching profession

1. **How can we further encourage high-performing and highly motivated school leavers to enter ITE and choose teaching as a career?**

The reality is that high achieving students know that they can get 'easier' or better-paid jobs in careers other than teaching. This is particularly the case in subjects such as Mathematics or STEM. Another inhibiting factor beyond the issue of pay is that even teaching graduates realise that as teachers they have limited options for career progression. In addition, as the teaching profession becomes more casualised, even the attraction of teaching as a secure employment pathway has started to wane.

We submit that these are issues which cannot be resolved through ITE in its own right but rather through the way the teaching profession is valued (and paid) in Australia. Other contributing factors include career advice, with career advisors often advising high-achieving students to consider careers such as medicine or law, as well as parental expectations. It is well-documented that, particularly in the case of migrant families, students are encouraged to pursue more prestigious careers than teaching.

2. **What changes to admissions and degree requirements, including recognition of prior experience, would better attract and support suitable mid- and late-career professionals from other fields transition into the profession and become quality teachers?**

Creating alternate pathways: La Trobe's Nexus programme

The increasing national shortage of teachers in Australia requires innovative and alternate approaches to attract and support career-changers to the teaching profession. As part of the Federal Government's High Achieving Teachers Program, La Trobe received \$6.3 million in funding in 2019 to deliver the Nexus programme – a supported 18-24 month Master of Teaching (Secondary) that gives students the opportunity in their first year of study to intern part-time as teachers' aides in hard-to-staff schools. In the second year, students become 'paraprofessionals' with a 0.8 teaching load (and their own class).

Students receive a small, part-time salary while studying as well as access to mentoring and professional development. More than 85 per cent of our Nexus teachers are placed in hard-to-staff, regional and rural schools, and the majority of these students have moved back to their regions after leaving them years before. Currently, La Trobe is also working with regulators namely TEQSA and the Victorian Institute of Teaching to find a way to recognise these supported embedded placements as meeting course requirements at Masters level. This would enable further expansion of the Nexus programme allowing us to train even more teachers (especially career-changers) and reaching more schools.

Judging from the experience to date and preliminary assessment of the programme (see Annex 1), we consider that the Nexus program offers a promising model to support the attraction and retention of quality teachers in hard-to-staff schools that could be further expanded. Given that students also receive a part-time salary while studying, this may be of interest to career-changers who are discouraged from taking time off work to study due to loss of income.

Recommendation: Increase investment in alternative pathways to teaching including through the Government's High Achieving Teaching Program to create a broader pipeline of high quality teaching professionals and to further entice career changers to teach in high-need areas.

- a. **With regard to La Trobe's Nexus program in particular, consider the potential of the program to expand its reach through supporting a national rollout with a focus on regional, rural and remote schools. As a regional ITE provider, La Trobe is well-placed to deliver such an expansion.**
- b. **Extend Nexus to Catholic and Independent School sectors**

Career progression and prospects in the Teaching Profession

The availability of alternative and innovative pathways to the Teaching Profession would go a long way towards attracting more career changers to teaching. However, we would argue that additional stumbling blocks for career changers are the career and remuneration prospects in the teaching profession.

According to the **2020 Graduate Outcomes Survey** median salaries for the 'Teacher Education' study area compare well with median salaries for other study areas. In fact, with a median salary of \$70,000, teacher education is among the most well-paid professions at entry level. This information tends to be corroborated through the OECD's 2019 '**Education at a Glance**'¹ report which claims that Australia's teacher salaries compare well and are among the highest across OECD countries. However, a key point that emerges in the OECD report is that the relative salaries for high-performing, experienced Australian teachers are low compared to their OECD peers. This flatlining of teacher salaries in Australia may make it difficult to attract and retain the highest achieving teachers. This would imply that what needs to be addressed are the long-term rather than starting salary prospects for teachers. Improving long-term salary outcomes for teachers, would not only help to retain experienced teachers but would also help to attract high-achievers from other professions who may be hesitant to move to the teaching profession due to the prospect of lower salaries.

On the point of retaining experienced teachers, beyond the salary limitations, other major issues are the workload and expectations linked to the profession with limited means of support. For instance, if existing teachers were able to take short career breaks to reskill or to undergo further mentoring, this would help avoid burnout, meaning that more experienced teachers would remain in the profession.

3. How can we increase ITE completion rates so that quality ITE students graduate and pursue careers as quality teachers?

¹ OECD (2019), *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f8d7880d-en>.

It is important to keep in mind that completion rates may not have anything to do with ITE per se. It is a fact that the teaching profession has become very hard, and at times, less desirable. Sometimes, when prospective teachers undertake their placements, the difficulty of the job becomes clearer and this leads to attrition. The quality of mentoring that students receive is not always consistent and during their placements, some students may miss out on the opportunity to develop their skills and to be properly supported to understand their profession. This tends to happen more in schools in low SES areas with remote learning due to COVID-19 further complicating matters.

4. What more can be done to address issues with workforce supply in some subject areas (particularly maths) and schools?

Investing in proven successful models rather than makeshift solutions

Continuing challenges with workforce supply (and particularly in the context of a looming national (rather than state-based) teacher shortage in Australia) often lead to 'quick and easy' or haphazard attempts to find a quick solution. This leads to new, untested initiatives constantly being launched. **In our view, it would be better to support, expand and consolidate existing programs which are proving to be successful rather than constantly trying to reinvent the wheel. For instance, as further outlined in Annex 1, while still in its early stages, La Trobe's Nexus programme is already showing positive signs for all stakeholders involved with teachers and schools reporting high levels of satisfaction. Instead of constantly bringing in new programs, it is best to consolidate existing successful programs.**

The division of responsibilities among state and federal entities is not without its challenges. For instance in Victoria, there are competing employment based pathways, some of which are funded federally and some of which are funded at state level. While this brings competition and choice, it can also be confusing to schools and school leaders while also drawing on the same pool of student teachers. Unfortunately, at times, a lot of energy ends up being lost on the administrative aspects of running these programs which end up negatively impacting the profession. **We would certainly argue that ITE providers are best placed to run such employment-based programs.**

Another issue to be borne in mind is that there is often a conflation between the need for more teachers and the parallel but separate goal of distribution of teachers. For instance, a key challenge is how to ensure that the majority of high-achieving Mathematics teachers do not all gravitate to middle class or independent schools. When considering issues of supply and demand, the separate challenge of what is sometimes described as "teacher sorting" also needs to be considered.

Further research required on improving retention in the Teaching Profession

- There are a number of factors impacting workforce supply issues including attracting students to ITE courses but also retaining teachers in the profession. Retention is an issue for the teacher profession Australia-wide, and it seems to be particularly prevalent in regional rural and remote areas with a very high turnover of staff. Available data on the reasons for teachers leaving the profession is inadequate. This is a pressing research shortfall that needs to be urgently addressed.
- From our experience of regional ITE delivery, one of the challenges that teachers in regional, rural and remote schools face is that they teach disproportionately out-of-field e.g. an English teacher who ends up teaching Science because there is nobody else to do it. Similarly, some teachers in charge of career advice may be those with 'spare time' in their teaching schedule rather than those with specialist knowledge or training. The combined lack of access to 'academic' subjects and inadequate career advice for teachers will impact on the learning experience, achievements and aspirations of regional students. This also contributes to teacher attrition and workforce

instability. Other challenges for teachers in regional, rural and remote areas include the lack of supporting infrastructure to support new arrivals in a regional community such as difficulties to find accommodation as well as the lack of security associated with short-term contracts. If prospective teachers are only offered a short-term contract, they are less likely to be attracted to make a move to work regionally. Contract-based employment tends to have an impact on labor mobility.

- Our experience from the first years of the Nexus programme (see Attachment 1) is that employment-based pathway programs might be more successful in helping to stem attrition in hard-to-staff schools such as regional, rural and remote schools.
- Building on the work of the 'National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools Program', La Trobe has conducted research on how to address teacher attrition negatively impacting on low SES communities. Despite several attempts, including financial incentives to reverse the trend, it seems that the problem continues to persist. Early indications suggest that teachers in disadvantaged schools feel isolated, increasing the likelihood of attrition. Teachers want to be more supported, more valued and want better opportunities for professional development. To address this, a more productive approach could be to develop a program of preparation and support for early career teachers. Through strong mentoring, communities of practice and attention to the specific challenges of teaching, teachers would feel a better sense of belonging and increase their likelihood of staying. Particularly for pre-service teachers with a record of high academic achievement and successful learning, it can be harder to relate to different contexts of learning. Again, through closely working with the community and with the schools, it would be possible for pre-service teachers to be more adequately prepared for the specific context of where they will be teaching.

Recommendation: Commission further research on the various reasons leading to teacher attrition in Australia

5. How can we attract a more diverse cohort into ITE so that teachers better mirror the diversity in school students and society?

The goal of diversity in the teacher workforce is crucial and closely linked to the issue of entry criteria. For instance, Indigenous candidates are less likely to be able to enrol into a Masters degree because they are less likely to have had opportunities to read for undergraduate degrees. This can also be the case for prospective teachers from migrant backgrounds who may face difficulty in qualification recognition or having sufficient prior experience to satisfy entry into alternate pathways.

In terms of increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and the best approaches for teacher retention, the findings and recommendations of the MATSITI (More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative) project, a five year program that focused on increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people entering and remaining in professional teaching positions in Australian schools, remain relevant and could be considered for potential application to a non-Indigenous teaching cohort.

Recommendation: Consider setting up alternate ITE pathways that are specifically geared towards underrepresented cohorts such as Indigenous and migrant cohorts to enable them to enter the profession, keeping in mind that the requirement of a Bachelor award prior to undertaking a Master of Teaching is one of the major obstacles for underrepresented cohorts.

Part B - Preparing ITE students to be effective teachers

6. What more can we do to ensure that ITE curriculum is evidence-based and all future teachers are equipped to implement evidence-based teaching practices?

Global trend of ITE practice lagging scientific evidence

La Trobe notes that the fact that, in ITE, practice appears to lag behind scientific evidence. This is a global trend rather than an Australian trait. At the same time, there have been many landmark reviews and inquiries in the past dealing with various aspects of the ITE curriculum, which were regrettably not implemented. For instance, none of the Australian states and territories adopted the 20 recommendations of the 2005 National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy. We would argue that if those recommendations had been implemented, they would have had an impact on Australian literacy standards.

Similarly, the 2019 'Short-Changed: Preparation to Teach Reading in Initial Teacher Education'² report, which audited the content of 116 literacy units in across 38 universities, found that only 6% of literacy unit outlines made reference to the five essential elements of effective evidence-based reading instruction. The report lamented the lack of progress by universities in reforming and improving the quality of ITE in preparation to teach reading, despite the findings of numerous reports and inquiries.

La Trobe's emphasis on evidence-based practices in ITE

La Trobe has made it a priority to increase the emphasis on evidence-based practises in its ITE courses. We use the term Impactful pedagogies in our programs to include knowledge and skills for setting learning goals and structuring lessons; linking research to practice through high impact teaching strategies; differentiating teaching; using assessment data as a basis for analysing learning and inform teaching practice; and awareness of how to work effectively in different social, cultural, virtual, outdoor, school and classroom learning contexts. This is done through a number of initiatives including the SOLAR lab (see further details in Annex 2), participation in the Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium (see response to Question 8) and through the La Trobe Industry PhD program.

More scope for sharing of best practice and evidence among Australian states and territories

The nature of Australia's education system means that there are eight different Departments of Education in each of the states and territories each adopting different approaches to various aspects impacting ITE. For instance, evidence-based approaches to 'reading instruction', are implemented differently in different jurisdictions. And despite the national standards, accreditation of teachers happens at state level.

We would argue that at times this is leading to duplication of work, effort and resources and that there should be more sharing among states and territories' departments of Education particularly on evidence-based successful models.

Another major issue is that ITE providers do not have access to the evidence and data from regulatory authorities, which is crucial information to understand retention and attrition. The only information that ITE providers receive is how many student teachers proceed to the registration phase, without any information divulged about those students that never made it to the point of registration. We submit that that there is scope for much improvement in terms of collecting and sharing data between different Departments of Education, universities and registration authorities. An insight into this data would enable ITE providers and also Departments to better understand, and therefore address, the reasons behind attrition and retention, thus providing invaluable information for workforce planning.

² Buckingham, Jennifer; Meeks, Linda. (2019). 'Short-Changed: Preparation to Teach Reading in Initial Teacher Education', Five from Five.

7. What more can ITE providers and employers do to ensure ITE students are getting the practical experience they need before they start their teaching careers?

As outlined in the response to Question 9, the development of strong partnerships between the profession and employers would lead to better outcomes, particularly if there is provision for adequate mentoring of prospective teachers. However, such partnerships can only be sustainable and successful in the long-term if they are adequately resourced and supported.

In order to provide PSTs, schools and universities with the maximum opportunity to provide quality learning experiences to build quality graduates, La Trobe is implementing a 'Professional Experience Cohort Model', which aims to build a community of practice in school and early learning contexts. Rather than a transactional approach to placements where universities shop around for schools to take up a PST with little or no collaboration and sense of shared practice, the cohort model is enshrined in an agreement where a community of future teachers are being mentored as a collective group. The aim is for key academics from the School of Education to work with school mentors and leadership to develop PST practice and research with a sense of true partnership. Working closely with partner schools to enhance our students and their practice, a cohort model of PST in a school strengthens the peer learning opportunities to PSTs and teachers in schools. This model provides all key stakeholders with shared responsibility to develop and improve the teaching profession together.

8. How can Teaching Performance Assessment arrangements be strengthened to ensure graduate teachers are well-prepared for the classroom?

La Trobe submits that a considerable amount of work and resources have already been dedicated by HEIs to strengthen performance assessments. In particular, La Trobe is part of a 19-strong consortium of Higher Education Providers from across Australia who are participating in the implementation of the **Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment (GTPA)** – an authentic, summative culminating assessment undertaken in a final-year professional experience placement, which aims to demonstrate graduate readiness on program completion. In completing the GTPA, preservice teachers demonstrate the complete planning, teaching, and assessing cycle. They also show how they use evidence of student learning during their final-year professional experience placement. To date, more than 15,000 pre-service teachers have completed the GTPA across the full range of ITE programs and education phases.

Initially developed by [The Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education](#) in 2015 and refined ever since, the GTPA was developed to meet the requirements of the Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures to assure quality teacher preparation. Program Standard 1.2 requires that 'pre-service teachers ... have successfully completed a final-year teaching performance assessment prior to graduation' (AITSL, 2015 updated 2018, p. 10).

In 2021, a collective of HEIs including La Trobe, agreed to implement the GTPA in a wide range of ITE courses at Bachelor and Masters levels. As part of this large-scale project, teacher educators are working together to ensure the fidelity of how the GTPA is implemented, apply the established standard, and undertake systematic moderation for comparability purposes. This is a significant investment of expertise to strengthen public confidence in the quality of teacher education³. Further information can be obtained through [Home - GTPA \(graduatetpa.com\)](#).

In addition to its formal participation in the GTPA process as outlined above, La Trobe shares these observations from its experience as a long-term ITE provider:

³ <https://www.graduatetpa.com/>

- Making sure that teachers are 'classroom ready' is more complex than appears on paper. ITE is designed to teach what is considered as 'best practice' and there is no guarantee that graduates will readily walk into a classroom where best practice is being implemented. There is therefore sometimes a mismatch between what graduate teachers have been taught to expect in a classroom which is performing well and what they actually encounter when placed in schools. This is a difficult conundrum for ITE education because ITE providers would not want to get students 'ready' for a classroom which is not performing as it should. One example of where this mismatch may occur is in classroom management. ITE providers can prepare prospective teachers for the most evidence-based knowledge about classroom management but this obviously does not always match reality. One way of that this can be addressed is through partnerships. One could argue that the term 'classroom ready' is in fact a misnomer and that the focus should be on teachers being 'profession ready' i.e. prepared as skilled educators who can work across a multitude of contexts and schools.

9. How can leading teachers, principals and schools play a greater role in supporting the development of ITE students?

Increasing the already high workload and accountabilities of existing teachers, principals and schools will not lead to attracting, preparing or retaining more teachers. If anything, support and resources should be focused on relieving the workload of teachers and school leavers particularly administration-related tasks.

One way that the development of ITE students can be supported is through stronger partnerships between the profession, schools and early learning centres to strengthen mentoring, career progression and retention. This is at the heart of La Trobe's Nexus programme highlighted above. However, relationships do not form overnight and time is required for these partnerships to develop.

The importance of quality mentoring cannot be overstated and this is an area where we really consider that there is an opportunity to invest to lead to better outcomes. In reality the quality of the pre-service experience for prospective teachers depends almost entirely on the quality of their supervising teachers, who are often themselves overloaded. **If there is adequate support for existing teachers to incorporate mentoring as part of their workloads (not in addition to their workloads), we think this would lead to a step-change in supporting the development of ITE students.** Similarly, universities should be adequately funded to be able to provide this same level of mentoring support to ITE students.

Recommendation: Enable and incentivise partnerships between the profession, schools and early learning centres to increase mentoring, career progression and retention.

10. Can ITE providers play a stronger role in ongoing professional development and support of teachers?

Yes, we submit that ITE providers have a significant role to play in the ongoing professional development and support of existing teachers, particularly to keep teachers up to speed with research developments in this field. As mentioned in the discussion paper, La Trobe's Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) Lab Introductory and Intermediate online short courses for teachers and allied health professionals are designed primarily for primary and secondary school teachers but also target allied health professionals and parents who want to understand more about the science of language and reading as this pertains to initial reading instruction and support for struggling learners. These highly successful specialised short courses cover the linguistic basis of early reading as this applies to word decoding and language comprehension. Participants also gain knowledge of evidence-informed instruction and support that they can apply in the classroom, a clinic, or at home. Further information about the SOLAR Lab is included in Annex 2.

Funding to expand such programs would enable ITE providers such as La Trobe to increase their capacity, not only in terms of expanding the suite of courses that they offer but also in terms of the number of participants that they can reach. A good way of depicting the ITE journey using a driving proficiency analogy is to see ITE students as being the L plates, graduates being the P plates and proficient and leading teachers continuing to have opportunities for professional development throughout their careers.

Recommendation: Promote and ensure quality in professional development by identifying specific university offerings, including short courses, graduate certificates, graduate diplomas and master programs, that are declared to satisfy professional development requirements under teacher registration.



Nexus Program Impact

July / 2021

Preliminary Report

The Nexus Model

The aim of this report is to present preliminary findings of the impact of La Trobe University's Nexus program. It will begin by explaining Nexus in more detail to contextualise evidence followed by a short discussion of constraints in applying the term 'impact' in the context of Nexus as a new program. It will then present evidence of impact to date and highlight how the Nexus program has evolved, especially during COVID. Impact evidence includes student and school surveys and testimonials and addresses the impact of Nexus on such things as preparedness, understanding of low socioeconomic, diverse and regional hard-to-staff schools in Victoria, quality of mentoring, satisfaction in the program and, as much as possible before the first cohort have graduated, employment destinations. In the concluding remarks we will summarise key findings.

Background

Nexus is a federally funded and state supported employment-based pathway into Teaching in low socioeconomic schools across Victoria. La Trobe University received funding by the Commonwealth Government to select, train, mentor and graduate eighty Master of Teaching (Secondary) candidates over two cohorts. The employment related costs are funded by the Victorian Department of Education. The first cohort began the program in February 2020 and is graduating before the end of the year. It follows that, unlike with longer established programs, the term 'impact' cannot yet be discussed in terms of student outcomes or long-term employment destinations (i.e. employment of graduate teachers or effectiveness as teachers). In this report, we will provide evidence of Nexus participants' performance as 'graduates who meet the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers at the Graduate career stage, and who can have a positive impact on school student learning' as discussed in a position paper by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL 2015, p. 3). We will provide data in the form of student and school staff surveys taken at various points as well as testimonials. In the following, we will provide details on candidate and school selection and placements.

Selection of candidates

As a social justice-oriented teacher education program, Nexus seeks high achieving candidates from disciplines other than teaching who want to work in hard-to-staff schools across Victoria. High achievement is based on an algorithm advocated by social justice teacher education programs at UCLA (Prof Tyrone Howard) and Boston University (Marilyn Cochran-Smith) who supported the design of Nexus. It builds on the well-established understanding that WAM or GPA are important (for teachers with deep content knowledge) but that other attributes are also significant in selecting, preparing and especially retaining teachers in hard-to-staff schools (see attached publication, Lampert & Browne, in press). Along with their usual application to study in the M. Teach, we look for a strong result in applicants' undergraduate degree. This is one variable; additionally as part of the application process they submit a short essay on their motivation to enrol in the program, passion for teaching and social justice, personal background and experiences, resilience, and commitment to teaching in disadvantaged schools for the long term. We are specifically targeting students from historically 'disadvantaged' backgrounds (Indigenous,

low socio-economic, culturally, or linguistically diverse) and highly sought-after teaching areas (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Languages). After review of applications, candidates are invited to an interview with Nexus staff and a school principal for potential placement.

School partnerships

Nexus partners with Schools that are commonly described as 'hard-to-staff' or 'disadvantaged' based on an Index of Community Socio-Economic Advantage (ICSEA) value below the national median (1000). Schools are based in metropolitan, regional, and rural Victoria and are provided with some funding to select an experienced teacher from their school to mentor each Nexus student throughout their candidacy.

Community engagement

A unique aspect of Nexus is its commitment to community engagement. This is an integral part of the program, based on the research that teachers are often not from the communities in which they teach and have very little preparation on understanding communities outside of the school walls. In Nexus, each participant is offered the opportunity for a community mentor. During Covid this was difficult to organise (since face-to-face meetings were impossible and many community services were highly stressed or unable to open). However, we innovated in bringing community groups into our fortnightly meetings to give presentation, share experiences in their own voices and engage in live discussions. Over twenty community representatives have worked with Nexus in metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria since the inception of Nexus.

School placements

Candidates are based in schools during their candidature as Education Support Class Employees for one day a week in school term one, and two days a week each in school terms three and four. Their salary is paid for by the Victorian Department of Education. At the end of the first year, students apply for their permission to teach to take over their own classroom from term one through to term four the following year. This salary is provided by the school. Principals select candidates based on their application, interview, and expected vacancies in the teaching areas of candidates.

Data points

- Number of current Nexus candidates (two cohorts): 52
- Regional/rural candidates: 71%
- Number of Cohort One candidates to graduate in July 2021: 22
- Number of Cohort One candidates to graduate in Dec 2021: 9
- Number of School partners: 30
- Regional /rural schools: 70%

Nexus schools are spread geographically from Gippsland in the East to Albury-Wodonga in the North, Mildura in the Northwest, and the Wimmera region. Most partnering schools are within a 100- kilometre radius of La Trobe campuses in Melbourne, Albury-Wodonga, Bendigo, Shepparton, and Mildura with local Nexus staff supporting schools and students.

Current Developments

Like many other Initial Teacher Education programs, Nexus experienced some attrition during the constantly changing circumstances of the pandemic, resulting in a current cohort one strength of 31. However, we note here that attrition will be like other programs if the employment conditions are taken into consideration. Financial security is highly likely to contribute to a lower attrition rate during candidature in other programs as students receive full paraprofessional wages beginning several weeks into their programs. Our attrition occurred while students had a part time income as ESCE for up to two days a week only. Since Nexus students began their paraprofessional roles on a full salary, we had not a single student withdrawing. This compares favourably to other alternative pathways into teaching where there is far less likely to be attrition once teachers are employed.

Originally Nexus was conceived as an 18-month accelerated M. Teach. However, the interruptions due to Covid highlighted one of the strengths of Nexus. Because Nexus is part of La Trobe's mainstream Initial Teacher Education program, Nexus students were able to move to the two-year study plan without any change at all to their Nexus enrolment or their work in the school. This is also partly due to the strong support we have received from Victorian Institute of Teachers (VIT) who supported Nexus students through their Permission to Teach process and extended the Nexus PTT contract of 12 months for those who would take the full two years to graduate. Students can complete the Master of Teaching (Secondary) in either 18 months or 2 years so that the first candidates will be graduating in July this year with the remainder to follow before the end of the year.

In Nexus, school principals must anticipate a vacancy in candidates' teaching areas before accepting students. Covid makes this much more difficult for principals to predict in their workforce planning. The commitment for the second Nexus intake this year was reduced due to the uncertainty of school enrolment numbers and other factors affected by COVID. As a result, the Nexus intake at the beginning of the program for cohort two was reduced to 21. Both Federal and State Departments of Education have agreed to extend Nexus to three intakes so that the originally contracted 80 graduates can be achieved. The Commonwealth funded Nexus for \$6.3 Million or \$78,750 per trained Teacher over the first three intakes. If this number is achieved, Nexus appears to be a very cost-effective way to train teachers under the Government's High Achieving Teachers Program umbrella. Published data for Teach for Australia (TfA), for example, reports a cost of \$179,000* per trained teacher for the first three intakes (Newscorp, 2014) well above double the cost for Nexus trained teachers in a comparative timeframe. According to the Newscorp article, this figure was provided by the Department of Education to the Senate in May 2014 and can therefore be regarded as reliable comparison. We use the 2014 figures to compare costs of a beginning program rather than comparing the impact of a new program (Nexus) with those that have been running for a longer time.

The average cost per trained teacher for intake four and five of TfA has come down to \$127,000 and Nexus is expected to experience similar economies of scale. In fact, the State Department is convinced of Nexus' potential and based on positive feedback has already agreed to fund a further fourth intake of Nexus students beyond the originally contracted quota.

*2014 figures not adjusted for inflation

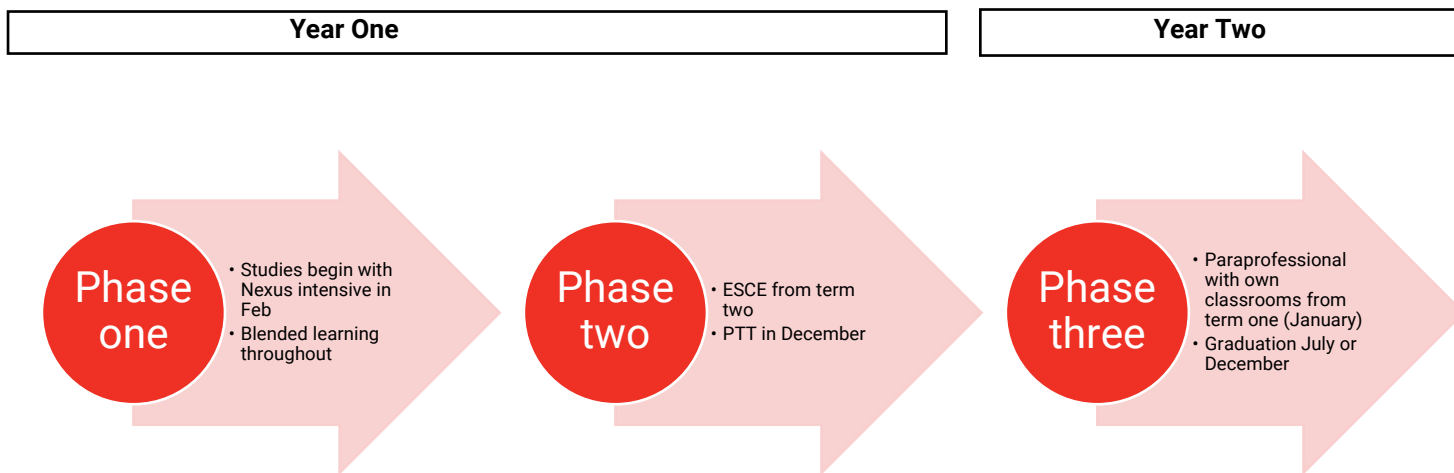
Impact evidence

This section will provide evidence of Nexus impact as described in student surveys, student testimonials, school surveys and testimonials by school staff. It will begin by providing an overview of the Nexus candidature timeline to contextualise evidence and finish by providing an outlook on further impact evaluation activities.

Overview

In order to be able to contextualise surveys and testimonials to the respective phase of the participants' studies, the chart below details the timeline of students' candidature. It only refers to the phases during their candidature, depending on their study trajectory 18 months or 2 years. For the purpose of this report, the selection and post-graduation employment support phases have been omitted.

Figure 1: Timeline of candidature



The acronym ESCE in Phase two above refers to placements of candidates in schools as Education Support Class Employees for one day per week in school term one and two days a week each in terms three and four.

The Paraprofessional employment in the second year (phase three) consists of a 0.8 workload with 0.2 (one day per week) for studies.

Student surveys

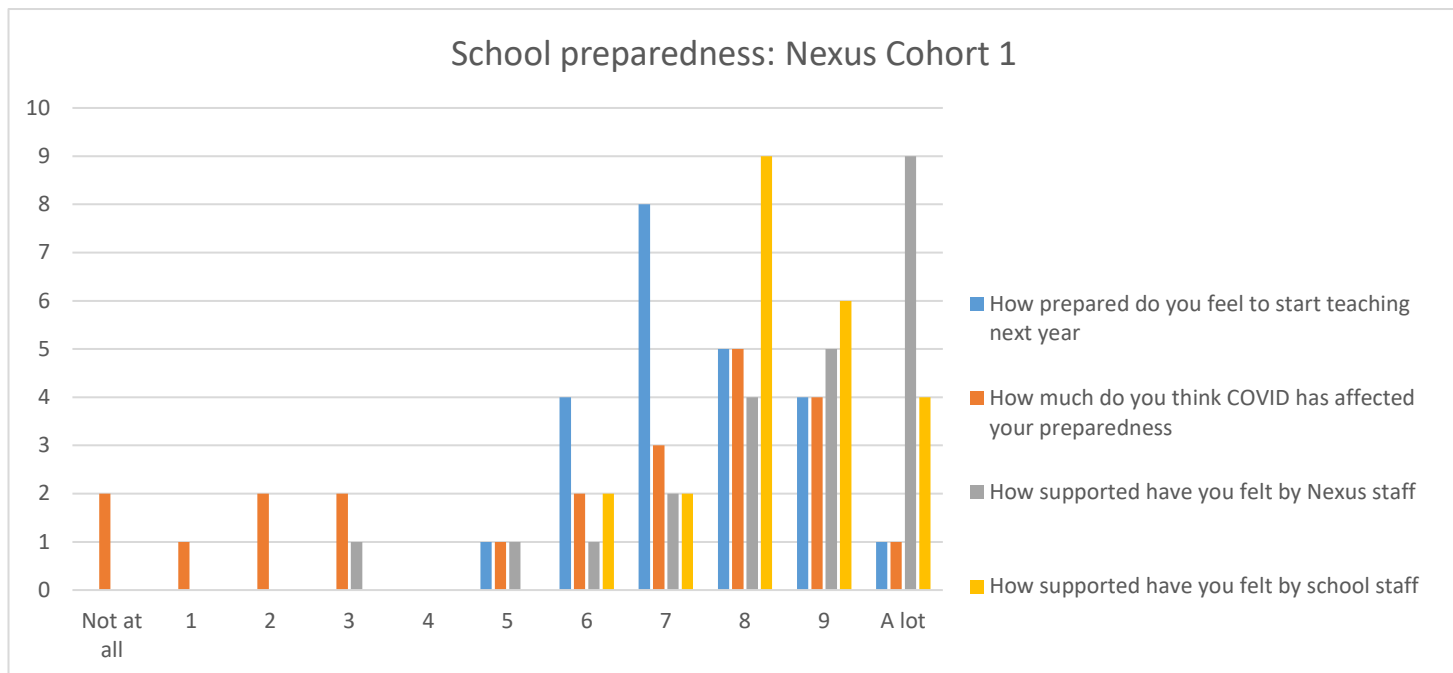
The Nexus team asks participants to participate in satisfaction and school preparedness surveys twice yearly. This section will provide evidence of impact in terms of graduate performance relating to the end of phase 2, meaning after their first year of study, completion of ESCE work in schools and just before taking over their own classrooms in phase three.

Student preparedness survey

The first cohort applied for their Permission to Teach in December 2020. At that point in time we invited them to participate in a survey self-assessing their preparedness to take over their own classrooms in term one, 2021. Given disrupted placements and long periods of remote teaching and learning during last year we also included one question on how the health crisis has affected students' preparedness to take on their paraprofessional roles.

We reproduce below two charts generated by the data from this survey. Figure two represents data from general preparedness questions including support by Nexus staff and schools and figure three represents data specifically mapped against the Australian Professional Standards for Graduate Teachers. To recall, the extent to which participants report fulfilling these standards is part of AITSL's call for assessing impact as outlined on page one of this report. The figures are based on self-assessment of students who were asked to place their answers on a scale of 0-10 with 0 being not at all. 23 of 31 Nexus students participated in the survey (74%).

Figure 2: School preparedness



It will be noted that all students reported at least some feeling of being prepared while most feel adequately prepared as all answers bar one fall into the upper half of the scale. No student reported a feeling of not being prepared or only to some extent.

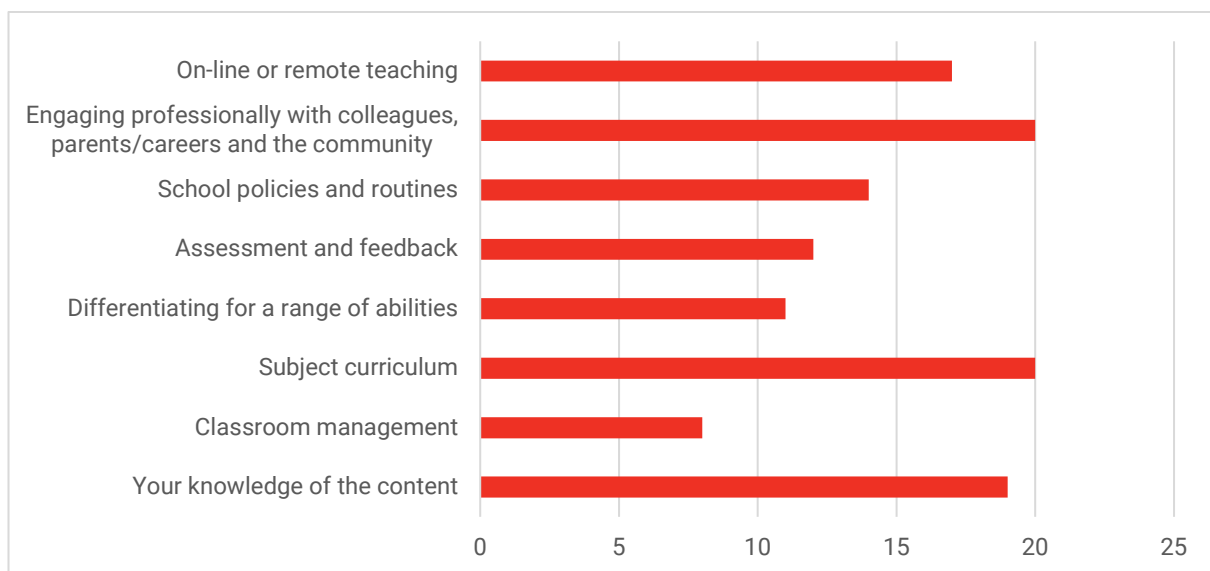
In the comment section on the original survey one respondent explained that 'reduced classroom time was a shame but out of Nexus's control, and through ESW we've had more opportunity than most' (ESW refers to the original terminology of Education support worker which is now known as Education Support Class employee).

They are referring to prolonged disruptions in face-to-face teaching opportunities that affected all Teaching students to varying degrees. The fact that students were kept embedded in the school through their support staff

role (remotely and face-to-face) appears to have had a supporting effect in classroom preparedness. In their ESS roles Nexus students responded to school needs, doing everything from tutoring online, going to schools face to face to work with at-risk students, preparing homework packs and curriculum, and phoning parents amongst other things. The experiences they had as Education Support Staff was considered by participants to have been invaluable, a slow scaffolding into teaching in a particularly difficult year and is strongly supported by testimonials in later sections.

Interestingly, some students reported to not have been or only to some extent have been affected by COVID restrictions on teaching/work activities while almost 70% of respondents unsurprisingly report at least some to an extreme effect. Part of this depending on the geo-location in which they were located. Support by Nexus and School staff has also been overwhelmingly reported as at least adequate to extremely good. Answers to the more important question related to confidence to meet the APST standards are represented in figure three below.

Figure 3: APST related preparedness



The x-axis in figure three denotes the number of answers falling into each category. Content knowledge, subject curriculum, school policies, professional engagement and on-line or remote teaching are the areas where most students reported a reasonable feeling of confidence. The fact that high-achieving students had been selected for Nexus and were embedded in schools from term two would have contributed to this outcome. Where students felt less confident were the areas of classroom management, differentiation, and assessment. Again, given restricted supervised placements with reduced placement days during that year this reported outcome is not surprising.

We note that Covid also gave us opportunities to try new methods to prepare Nexus teachers. For instance, though we could not proceed with a face to face intensive, we replaced this with a very successful fortnightly zoom drop in seminar series. During this series we tackled the topics above and invited in our community mentors to give talks (and hold conversations) about such things as youth homelessness (Safe Haven, Mildura); trauma-informed learning (Banksia Gardens Community Centre Melbourne), mental health (Junction, Wodonga), cultural diversity (Reservoir Neighbourhood House), LGBTQI+ (Safe Schools), neurodiversity (QDivergent) and meditation and well-being (Rachel Grace). We have also partnered with Nalderun Aboriginal Services; Indigenous storytelling (Boori Prior), asylum seekers and arts-based storytelling. Our students have had Berry Street training, SOLARLab (science of reading) and trauma-informed learning workshops. This community-engaged element of Nexus is unique to

teacher education and presenters were unanimous in their excitement about co-designing how teachers are prepared in this way. All sessions were recorded.

Student testimonials

Supporting evidence in terms of the achievement of graduate performance will be reported in this section. At the end of phase two (just before taking over their own classrooms), one student sent an email to Nexus staff outlining his feeling of preparedness.

I wanted to write to you to thank you for such a great year in the Nexus program. While there have been enormous challenges thrown at you, the core components of the program still worked really well: I have spent a lot of me in classrooms or with classes, I am getting to know my new community in [name of town], I benefited from additional learning opportunities, and I am ready to hit the ground running [...] I am so excited for 2021.

After the first four weeks in the school as paraprofessional, a student reported that 'I have to say that my overwhelming feeling is that I am so glad to be in a position where I can do some good'.

We note our flexibility in trying as much as possible to prepare our Nexus participants during 2020 when placements were on hold. In the case of Nexus our participants were much advantaged over other preservice teachers in that they were already working with students in schools and had much more experience than other graduates were able to acquire. This was appreciated by principals and participants themselves.

With reduced opportunities for supervised classroom placements, Nexus hired young actors (all of them high school students) for teaching simulations with feedback. These actors, from Hobo Theatre Company in Daylesford, took on roles of 'online' students (some disruptive, some disengaged, some high achieving) while Nexus teachers taught a 5- minute class in their subject areas. This was followed by feedback. In designing this new innovative 'simulation' we can provide additional practice for Nexus teachers.

Based on this experience, one participant commented that

I found it a really positive experience; the students were challenging but kind, and I felt tested by the task of winning over new kids really quickly. What this achieved was to give me confidence that outside the school I'm at, with kids I know (albeit online) I am on track in my development to becoming a teacher.

This simulated teaching experience supported participants' feeling of confidence in their abilities and was regarded by many participants as successful in increasing their understanding of their own practice and reflecting on their professional capabilities and future goals.

During supervised teaching episodes (placements) Nexus candidates' classroom practice was also regularly observed by Nexus staff who are all qualified Secondary teachers. After observations, school students are sometimes asked for written feedback on their Nexus teacher. The feedback reproduced below provides first-hand evidence of capabilities at the middle of phase 2, before candidates completed their first year of studies.

School student one observes that

In the mornings [Name of Nexus teacher] asks questions to learn more about her students as well as to get us thinking in the mornings. She sets an achievable amount of work yet still challenging enough to get our brains ticking. The work she has been setting has been very interesting and relevant.

It appears that the Nexus candidate is already finding a way to challenge and motivate students without overextending their abilities; the candidate is starting to know how students learn (APST 1). This interpretation is supported by the statement of a second student who exclaims that 'the tasks set have been great, not too easy not too hard, and I am always learning something new, or finding interesting facts.' Capability in motivating students can be seen in a statement by another school student who remarks that 'in our most recent tasks set I enjoyed being able to pick what we want to research, meaning I am learning about something that I am personally interested in.'

Nexus candidates also build professional relationships or rapport with students evidenced by another school student expressing that 'I feel comfortable to talk in our meetings or send her an email to ask for help, and she always gives me informative answers'.

Nexus participants are proud of their relationships with students and colleagues, posting feedback such as these on our Nexus closed Facebook group, sending them in emails, engaging in discussions on La Trobe platforms, and sharing in forums.

What enables Nexus candidates to have this rapport with school students once they enter the classroom as teachers is traced back to the work they conduct as Education Support Staff by some candidates. The reflexions of one Nexus student shared below discuss this effect in more detail

The support worker role has been invaluable. I have learnt so much about students' behaviours, their behavioural assessment reports, trying new things, suggesting things to different students, seeing individual student responses, and having hands on work with students in the classroom. The benefit of the ESW work has allowed me to work with students one on one before needing to manage an entire class. The skills I have learnt while working with students with individual needs, will help me to provide a safe, inclusive environment for all students. In addition, the ES work has allowed me to visit a range of classes. [...]The Nexus program contracts you to a chosen school for 2 years. This is a wonderful opportunity. I have developed friendships and solid working relationships at a whole school level. My ES work has allowed me to meet teachers individually, which has helped me to feel more comfortable approaching and talking to all the staff.

I have no regrets and would made the same decision again (despite not knowing that COVID-19 was upon us!) I can't wait to be a teacher and to be a positive influence in the lives of my students. I know it will be a rewarding career!

The Nexus student appreciates being embedded in the school from an early stage in a support role allowing him to get to know students, staff, and the work of teachers. The general feedback we receive from participants is the appreciation of being mentored, supported, and scaffolded carefully to take over their classrooms with continuing support through to graduation. As another Nexus candidate observed at the beginning of phase three, '[Name of Nexus staff]'s observation visit two weeks ago was incredibly helpful. I've already put some of her suggested strategies to use and they have worked like a dream!'. A few weeks later the same student remarks that 'I feel like I am making a small but meaningful difference. I know every teacher does this, but it's my first time seeing these outcomes after a term of working on relationships etc., and it's a pretty amazing feeling. Very humbling.'

The Nexus candidate expresses a feeling of accomplishment and competency before graduation not least influenced by the ongoing support of Nexus staff. Other students shared similar feedback about school visits and their Education Support role when stating that

I really appreciated when [the Nexus staff] came out to see us teach and give us that feedback. Because I felt like we had the perspective of someone who wasn't in the school, like an outsider; not really knowing what's going on but being able to comment and give us that feedback. I think it [the education support role] helped me personally massively...if I had been

coming in without that experience, I would not have been prepared at all to deal with the behaviour side of things. It gave me time to prepare and know what strategies to implement as a teacher.

and

I think this is the best strategy to go from ES to classroom teacher...the previous experience I've had with him [a student with challenging behaviour] gave me the strength to deal with the situation now.

While all of the testimonials reproduced above were presented as evidence supporting graduate capabilities it is worth noting that no Nexus student has graduated yet and evidence was collected throughout their candidature.

School staff impact evidence

As mentioned earlier, Nexus currently partners with 30 schools across Victoria and built partnerships with school principals, assistant principals, academic directors, and other staff including one dedicated school mentor for each of the 52 Nexus students.

A feedback email received by one Nexus school mentor at the end of phase two highlights the quick progression of professional attributes during candidacy. '[Name of Nexus candidate] is coming along in leaps and bounds and I've been really impressed with his teaching and classroom management techniques. He's going to make a great teacher.'

Professionalism and graduate capabilities of Nexus candidates at an early stage are impressing many school principals. Representative of similar feedback received it is worth reproducing an email from a principal at the beginning of phase three (paraprofessional role of Nexus candidate) below.

I wanted to let you know how pleased we are with [Name of Nexus student]. He may be one out of the box (even though I think he's actually not ;)) but he has started the year so smoothly that we often forget he is a grad and don't include him in induction emails!! I'm CERTAIN that his ability to slot right in is entirely due to him having spent last year with us, a HUGE advantage of Nexus compared to other intern programs. Aside from that, his actual teaching 'appears' to be going really well also. I've often walked past his classes and observed a very calm and engaged classroom, he's running his own detentions and seems to have a great handle on managing classroom behaviour, something ALL new staff find challenging here... Ultimately this is a request for another [Name of Nexus student] for each of the next 5 years.

This testimonial (with emphases in original) highlights the value of the Nexus model for Schools, namely that the carefully scaffolded lead up to teaching while being embedded in the school. This is beneficial to a smooth transition and carries with it the benefits of existing relationships with students and staff, procedural knowledge, and extended exposure to other teachers' modelling of professional behaviour and teaching techniques during the time spent as education support staff.

Similarly, in a meeting with Nexus staff, candidates, a school principal, and the local Federal Member of Parliament the principal spoke to the school partnership aspect of Nexus. He talked about how 'classroom ready' his four Nexus students were given their year-long association with the school. He talked about the existing problems with graduates transitioning into the profession and the impact the Nexus program will have on the high attrition rates of beginning teachers. [Name of Federal MP] was really interested in this, and the two Nexus students talked about how confident they felt moving into their para-professional role based on the relationships they have been able to establish in their ESW and placement experiences. (Source: Notes taken by Nexus staff). This meeting occurred at

the end of phase two, when students received their Permission to Teach before the summer break. The same principal also noted that the Nexus model had an added benefit for students who realise after their first year in a school that they are not yet classroom ready or who are deemed not classroom ready by supervising teachers. They can withdraw from Nexus but remain on the standard academic progression with the main cohort of Master of Teaching (Secondary) students. The principal pointed out that this allows students to withdraw from schools without 'loosing face' and still being able to achieve their teaching degree like any other student.

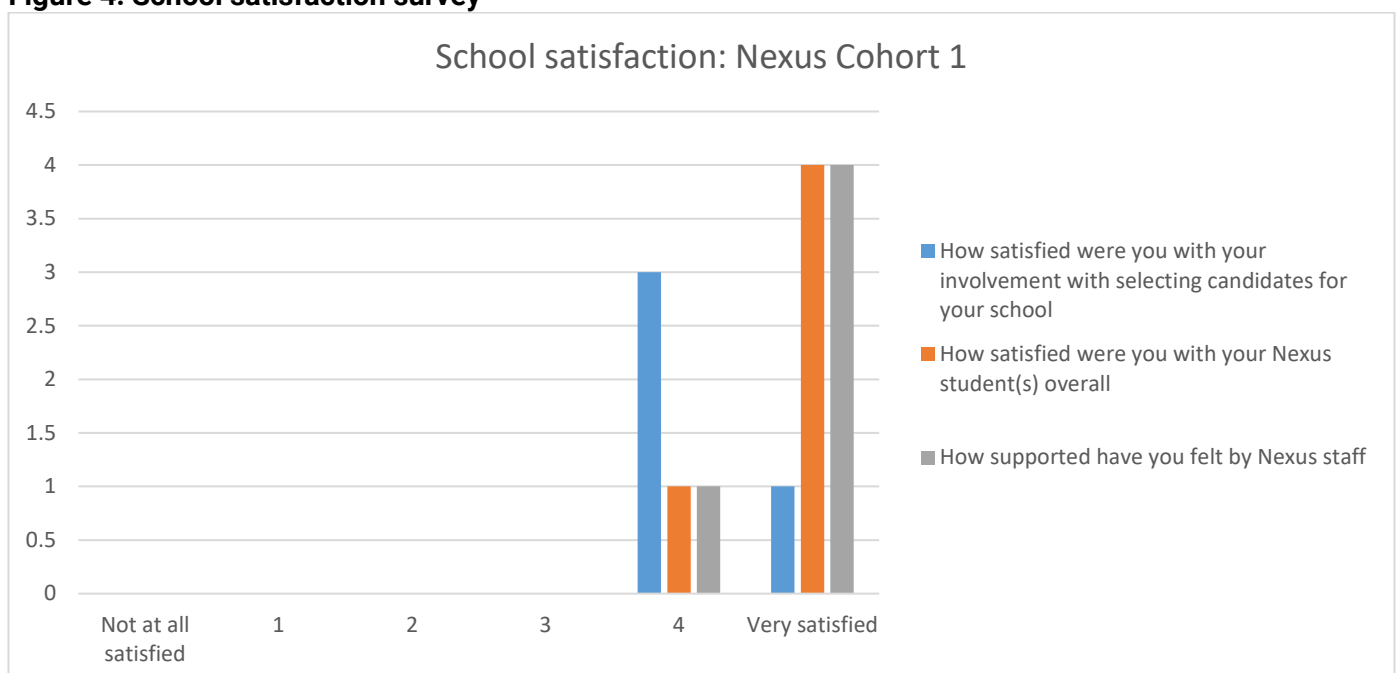
Finally, we reproduce a solicited recent feedback from a principal who sums up her experience with the Nexus model at the school in a more formalised way.

I consider the opportunity to be part of the NEXUS program a win / win for all involved. It provides the students a guaranteed two years in a school supplementing their learning at university as well as providing the school a valued and committed staff member. In their first year as an education support staff member, the students gain an authentic experience of both the day to day running of a school as well as the strategic forward planning. It is also during their first year that the students develop positive relationships with the students, staff, and parents within the school. These relationships certainly help the NEXUS students as they transition into teaching in the second year. During their second year, the students apply and build on their knowledge and skills of curriculum planning and assessment as well as pedagogy within their classes, supported closely by their mentor, along with all staff. As a Principal, I am committed to my staff, parents, and students, but also to the development of preservice teachers. I strongly believe this program provides the best opportunity for the development of confident and skilled teachers.

This experience with the Nexus model is somewhat supported by the results of a school satisfaction survey that Principals were asked to participate in at the end of phase two before Nexus students took on their own classrooms (December 2020).

The results are reproduced in figure four below.

Figure 4: School satisfaction survey



While, only four principals responded from what was at that point in time a partnership with 21 schools we believe this is understandable given the pressures on school leadership in 2020. Given the low response rate of 19% the figures are by no means conclusive or representative but show that respondents have been satisfied or very satisfied with their Nexus students and engagement with Nexus staff and the selection process.

Nexus staff are preparing a satisfaction survey for schools to be distributed at point of graduation of their Nexus teachers which will inform further impact evidence.

Concluding remarks

In this Nexus Program Impact Report, we provided impact evaluation evidence for a program that has not yet graduated any students. The inability to provide hard evidence in terms of graduate destinations and retention rates requires no further explanation. Instead, we focused on evidence that is part of any impact evaluation, namely graduate capabilities in terms of the APSTs. Even here, it is premature to speak of graduate capabilities before students have graduated, hence we subtitled the report as preliminary.

Nevertheless, we were able to pinpoint through surveys, testimonials, notes, and teaching observations some aspects of impact that the program had on participants, schools, school students, and teaching staff. In particular satisfaction in the program and graduate teacher preparedness to take over classroom after a year of intermittent lockdowns and reduced placement days was generally high and student testimonials provide evidence that this can be at least in part attributed to the structure of the program. Embeddedness in schools, exposure to other teachers' lessons as model of professional behaviour, classroom management and motivational techniques were reported as invaluable in Nexus students' level of preparedness.

The main conclusion drawn from the evidence is that the Nexus model of careful scaffolding of participants during Education Support roles along their journey to taking over their own classrooms as Paraprofessionals is highly appreciated by participants and school staff alike. It is an innovative and effective – not least cost effective - way for schools to 'grow their own' teachers. We acknowledge that any self-reporting in surveys and testimonials is subjective and not necessarily representative. These shortcomings can only be rectified once graduates have been in the workforce for a while and 'hard' data in terms of graduate outcomes or destinations as well as teacher impact on students become available. It is also worth noting that a direct comparison with other programs needs to consider the different program models. To be more precise, financial security is a determining factor of retention for any student and it is safe to surmise that different financial contributions lead to different outcomes in retention rates. We noted in the report that since Nexus participants began their paraprofessional positions not one had to withdraw while some previous withdrawals were attributed to financial pressures when students' family incomes were at risk during the health crisis.

The first Nexus students will graduate at the end of this month and all students have a contract with their school to the end of their second year, i.e. for cohort one to the end of 2021. We will soon be assisting students in gaining continuing employment and are looking forward to providing further impact evidence when it becomes available in the future.

Sources:

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Lampert, J. & Browne, S. (2022, accepted). *Examining Teacher Candidates' Backgrounds, Experiences and Beliefs as Precursors for Developing Social Justice Dispositions*. Teachers College Record.

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SOLAR LAB
Science of Language
and Reading Lab



La Trobe University School of Education The Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) Lab

Overview: July 2021

Being able to read, write, and spell has profound importance for individuals and the societies of which they are a part. Literacy is the gateway to all academic achievement and confers significant protection against individuals being destined to lives on the margins of the social and economic mainstream. Those with low literacy skills are significantly more likely to experience high rates of physical and mental health problems, reduced employment prospects, housing instability, and engagement with the criminal justice system. As such, effective reading instruction is as much a public health imperative as it is an education priority. However, the teaching of reading is simultaneously one of the most researched and one of the most contentious aspects of child development. This is particularly so in English-speaking countries because of the nature of the English writing system, which does not have the degree of transparency that some other languages (e.g., Italian and Spanish) have, and so is more difficult for young children to understand and use.

Three national inquiries (the [US](#), [Australia](#) and the [UK](#)) in the period 2000 to 2006 all reinforced the importance of teachers providing explicit instruction in how speech and print map to each other in English. Unfortunately, no state or territory in Australia has adopted the recommendations of our [National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy \(2005\)](#), meaning that there is high variability in what is taught in pre-service education programs as well as in classrooms across Australia. This is particularly problematic for children who start from behind for a range of reasons with respect to their transition to literacy in the early school years, as their need for high quality structured literacy instruction is magnified and urgent. If these needs are not met, the risk of educational failure, behaviour disturbance and other mental health problems, and school exclusion is greatly magnified.

The **Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) Lab** was established in the School of Education at La Trobe University in 2020, as a platform to support knowledge translation on the science of reading into classroom practice. The SOLAR Lab is leading the refresh of reading instruction content in La Trobe University School of Education undergraduate and postgraduate teacher preparation programs. This support is also provided to current practising teachers, through [online short courses](#) and through [direct work in schools](#). In the period September 2000 – May 2021, some 2300 participants (mainly teachers) completed SOLAR Lab short courses and further programs will be offered in the second half of 2021. A solid program of PhD and externally-funded research is also part of the platform.

The SOLAR Lab is strongly industry-connected and is premised on robust theoretical foundations in reading development, instruction, and support. We use the term “reading” to specifically identify core skills in text decoding and language comprehension that also promote success in writing and spelling.

The SOLAR Lab Co-Directors are [Professor Pamela Snow](#) and [Associate Professor Tanya Serry](#).