

Introduction

One of the two key questions posed by the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (QITER) Discussion Paper is: How can high-quality candidates be attracted into Initial Teacher Education (ITE)? Answers to this question have been sought by Australian Education Ministers since at least 2007, when Julia Gillard became Minister for Education. At that time, Barber and Mourshed (2007) published their influential McKinsey & Co report, *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top*. In this report, Barber and Mourshed (2007) presented Singapore's education system as a model due its combination of high academic performance (as measured by PISA and other international large-scale standardised tests, a matter of some controversy itself – see Sellar, Thompson and Rutkowski, 2017) at a relatively low cost. This vision of a low-cost-high-performing Australian Education system has been pursued by the Department of Education ever since. In this submission, I would like to discuss several key features of ITE in Singapore; critique the Australian efforts to emulate these; and argue that the QITER must take seriously the possibility that these efforts are actually exacerbating existing problems with ITE.

ITE selection in Singapore and Australia

The QITER Discussion Paper, citing Goss et al. (2019), states that the demand for ITE places is so high in Singapore that “only about one in ten students who apply to become teachers are accepted” (p. 3). The frequent references to Singapore in discussions of ITE in Australia suggest an assumption that Australia *should* emulate it, but this should not be taken for granted: QITER should consider more broadly what education in Australia should be and what sort of ITE selection processes are appropriate. However, this assumption does appear to underlie the ITE reform agenda, hence my engagement with it here.

Singapore's recruitment of ITE students has several interesting features. There is only one provider of ITE, the [National Institute of Education](#) (NIE). For [admission](#) into its Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE), candidates must submit an online application to the Ministry of Education; if they are shortlisted, they must then complete:

- A selection interview, which includes a written task, a short presentation and a discussion with the interview panel
- The [Entrance proficiency tests](#) (EPTs), which involve a 20-minute speaking test and a 100-minute, 700-word writing test
- A medical examination (paid for by the Ministry of Education)

Successful candidates are then required to complete a four-month [Compulsory Untrained Teaching Stint](#), before finally being admitted into the PGDE. They are paid a monthly salary of around \$3000 by the Ministry of Education, for the duration of their untrained teaching stint and the PGDE program.

In relation to these features, Australian ITE contrasts markedly with Singapore. Firstly, Australian ITE is not centralised: according to the QITER Discussion Paper, there are 47 different ITE providers and more than 350 different programmes. Secondly, selection processes vary somewhat amongst these different providers and programmes, and they are arguably not as extensive. For example, they do not include paid untrained teaching stints.

Thirdly, rather than being paid to train as a teacher, Australian ITE students have to pay for their course themselves.

Is LANTITE helping?

The introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education students (LANTITE) in 2016 can be read as a tentative step towards a selection process closer to Singapore's. However, Australian ITE students are required to complete LANTITE before *graduation*, not admission¹. Additionally, LANTITE test takers are given only multiple-choice and short answer questions, whereas Singapore's EPTs require students to speak and write². On LANTITE, students never have to write anything more than a single word. Finally, LANTITE students have to pay for each attempt at the Literacy and Numeracy components (\$196 in total).

Has the implementation of LANTITE helped to attract 'high quality candidates' into ITE or achieve the broader policy goals of "[raising the overall quality of Australia's school system and lifting student outcomes](#)"? It would be difficult to argue that it has done any of these things, given the data cited in the QITER Discussion Paper: its implementation has coincided with 32% decline in the proportion of "young high-achievers" choosing ITE (QITER, 2021, p. 5). LANTITE certainly is not the sole cause of this decline, but it is part of a set of reforms that, collectively, may be making ITE *less* attractive.

I urge QITER to seriously consider this possibility, and to ensure that the entire 'ITE ecosystem' is rigorously and independently evaluated. In the case of LANTITE, an implementation review was conducted by consulting firm Dandolo Partners for the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE). In May 2020, Dandolo provided to DESE a report in which they noted several consequences of LANTITE's introduction:

- "Some level of stakeholder concern about the test excluding otherwise potentially valuable candidates from the teaching profession.
- Significant stakeholder concerns about the impact of 'text anxiety'.
- An unknown (probably small) number of potential ITE students being deterred from studying ITE.
- Ongoing challenges in ensuring suitable access to the test, depending on students' preferred timing, location and required reasonable adjustments" (p. 1)

Further, the report states that 'non-English as a first language speakers' and Indigenous students are both significantly over-represented amongst those who are unable to pass LANTITE. Staff from several ITE providers who participated in the review identified LANTITE as "the reason that some Indigenous ITE students were unable to graduate or left the program, and that this was a major loss for the program and for the teaching workforce"

¹ I am not in favour of making LANTITE an entry requirement for three reasons. First, I do not accept that there is a problem with the 'quality' of the students currently being attracted to ITE – this remains a matter of debate. Second, I do not think that psychometric testing is an appropriate means of addressing concerns about ITE selection. Third, I do not think that LANTITE in its current form is a valid, reliable or fair psychometric test. These issues will not be resolved if students are required to pass LANTITE before entry rather than graduation.

² I intend here only to highlight differences in test format. I do not know anything about and make no claims about the validity, reliability or fairness of Singapore's EPTs.

(Dandolo, 2020, p. 14). This suggests that LANTITE is undermining QITER’s goal of ensuring “the teaching workforce reflects the diversity of the student population” (QITER, 2021, p. 8).

Despite these serious concerns, the Dandolo report has never been officially released (it was only made available to the public following a journalist’s Freedom of Information request) and has never been discussed publicly by the Education Minister. It appears that, to date, no action has been taken to address the issues raised in the report. Additionally, the Dandolo report emphasises that several important aspects of LANTITE were “outside the scope” of the implementation review:

- Whether the test is the right assessment tool.
- Whether the test is set at the right difficulty level.
- The performance of the test administrator, the Australian Council for Educational Research (e.g. processing test results).” (p. 1)

These matters have, as far as we know, not been investigated at all. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence in the public domain to suggest that there are problems in these areas – see Ali (2019), Smith (2021), Zaglas (2020), Zuccarelli (2020). Until the issues raised in the Dandolo report and other publications have been followed up, the vision of an “unrelenting focus on the rigour” of TEMAG reform implementation will remain unrealised (2021, p. 2).

Conclusion

In this submission, I have argued that ITE reforms in Australia may actually be undermining the policy goal of achieving a high-performing, low-cost education system like Singapore’s. I have focused on LANTITE as an example of a post-TEMAG reform that appears to be misguided and self-defeating but has not even been properly evaluated. What evidence does exist regarding LANTITE’s design and implementation strongly indicates serious flaws. Again, I urge QITER to take these concerns seriously and to bring to the review the ‘unrelenting focus on rigour’ that has been sadly lacking to date.

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