

Quality Initial Teacher Education Review

Introduction

The University of Wollongong (UOW) welcomes the initial teacher education discussion paper launched by the Hon Alan Tudge MP, Minister for Education and Youth in June 2021.

Our response has been developed from our extensive experience in initial teacher education (ITE). This submission is intended to complement the data available in reports and the research literature. We present considerations for this review, reflecting our collective professional experience, and offer specific recommendations for action.

We support the key propositions of this review, that:

- Teacher quality is a major factor in student success;
- High quality initial teacher education is critical to the preparation of future teachers;
- Professional standards play an important role in articulating the knowledge, skills and dispositions teachers need and how these develop with increasing expertise;
- Diversity in the profession is a priority to ensure our teachers reflect the society they are drawn from; and
- High levels of engagement between the profession and ITE providers is critical.

We further advocate that:

- All teachers should be of high quality and strategies to address teacher shortages cannot sacrifice quality or risk the standing of the profession;
- Continuous professional learning (beyond initial teacher education) and rich opportunities for career development are critical in nurturing and sustaining teachers in the profession;
- All ITE programs should demonstrate a strong commitment to scholarship by integrating established and recent evidence from a wide range of high-quality sources; and
- All ITE programs should integrate a range of work-integrated experience, including and beyond formal professional experience placements.

In offering this response, we note that ITE in Australia is already very successful. ITE student satisfaction, employer satisfaction and employability are all high. Australian ITE providers have successfully integrated the reforms from TEMAG and state-specific policy initiatives. Since 2020, we have worked closely with regulators and the profession to quickly implement a range of responses to ensure that our students could continue their programs, including their placements, despite the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has enabled high quality teaching to be maintained and also helped us to develop further agreed improvements to our ITE system.



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This well-established track record of cooperation and responsiveness means that we are working from a strong base, and there is a demonstrated willingness to continue improving ITE.

Understanding ITE in Australia

The many issues covered in the discussion paper give a sense of the complexity of the ITE system in Australia. These issues highlight the conundrums and challenges we face in coming to understand how to improve educational outcomes for students by improving teacher quality through the role ITE can play. ITE prepares graduate teachers who have been assessed through multiple academic and practical measures as having met the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers at Graduate level (<https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/standards>). In completing all of the requirements of their program of study, we judge them to be ‘classroom ready’, meaning they are ready to begin their careers as teachers.

New ITE graduates comprise a small percentage of the total teaching workforce. Upon employment they are dispersed, unevenly, into a mass, diverse national system. It is highly likely that their initial employment is fixed-term or casual, rather than in permanent positions. This status can then continue for many years. Like all graduates, newly qualified teachers enter workplaces where they have limited power to influence existing practices and effect change. *Often taking up positions in ‘harder to staff’ schools*, they are the most ‘junior’ members of staff and, necessarily, need to focus their early practice on obtaining accreditation to demonstrate they have met the standards at Proficient level to retain employment.

The demands on and expectations of new teachers are significant. They face the same challenges as any new employee entering a profession and a workplace - they need to apply their preparatory knowledge independently, with collegial support to adapt quickly and effectively to the requirements and expectations of them. New teachers must respond to the particular contexts of their school communities and the unwritten ground rules of their particular workplace setting. New teachers take on teaching responsibilities equivalent to more experienced teachers in that they have the same volume of students, programming requirements, must teach all subjects for which they are qualified, and communicate to parents and other stakeholders.

These structural realities means that ITE graduates are a critical component of the teaching workforce, but their impact is distributed and limited. Appreciating this should make us very realistic about the extent to which changes to ITE can and will flow-on to the system without changes to the system itself.



We wholeheartedly agree that ITE must be of the highest quality, **but it cannot be relied upon as the only lever for change** within a large, distributed and complex system. System change and improvement can only be achieved through a **coherent raft of initiatives that address the whole system** and are attuned to achieving specific goals.

Supportive Enablers for System Change

This review of the quality of initial teacher education provides a compelling case for systemic change. Scalable, sustainable and embedded improvement for a mass profession like teaching needs a multi-pronged approach consisting of a set of coherent and targeting actions. There is no one solution.

We suggest **three enabling supports** that can be oriented towards achieving system change:

1. System-level cooperation

Lasting system-wide change will require an unprecedented level of cooperation across all stakeholders. This includes the Commonwealth and state governments, teacher regulatory authorities, ITE providers, employers, unions, peak representative bodies, professional associations and providers of professional learning. All parties must come together in ways that support students, teachers, schools and communities. There is significant existing cooperation that can be harnessed through explicit systems level mechanisms created specifically for this purpose. These mechanisms must be ‘fit for purpose’ to support the complexity of the workforce in terms of skills, knowledge and experience.

2. High quality evidence

There is a wealth of research available to inform both teaching practice and initial teacher education. What we are lacking is a body whose role it is to independently assess existing evidence, commission research as needed, and to translate those findings into usable forms. A new national research institute would draw on Australian and international research capability, while at the same time guarding against the disproportionate influence of commercial and personal vested interests.

3. Constructive dialogue

Advances in initial teacher education and schooling more broadly would greatly benefit from a change in the tenor of our discussions and to the ways teachers, ITE providers, and schools are framed in the media. We need to build a discourse that is constructive and respectful, that is directed to more than initial teacher education, and deliberately strives for support across stakeholders that transcends political differences.

A constructive dialogue will set the conditions for a better-informed public debate and policy, and provide support implementation.

We acknowledge that all of our suggestions and recommendations require investment – of money and time, but also of talent and goodwill. What we propose considers value for money and opportunity cost in seeking broad, inclusive approaches rather than niche, high unit cost options.

Recommendations

We propose five key recommendations that respond to the three critical aspects for consideration set out in the terms of reference and the discussion paper:

1. Attracting and selecting teacher education students;
2. Preparing future teacher throughout their programs of study; and
3. Engagement between teacher education and the profession.

1. Extend the pathways into and through teacher education by adding a new option for mid-career professionals that combines employment options with greater flexibility in study patterns.

- This option should be introduced alongside the existing offerings which meet the needs of school leavers and recent undergraduates.
- It supports the continuation of Masters level postgraduate qualification, which is commensurate with the complexity and status of the professional work required for high quality teaching.
- Providers should continue to support a variety of pathways, including but not limited to: enabling programs, degree combinations, work-integrated learning and recognition of prior learning. These are already in place, but providers could expand and extend these options with the support of regulators.
- Nuanced analysis of sub-cohort data should be used to inform the design of pathways. Our experience is that implementation of the TEMAG reform requiring non-academic selection makes ATAR analysis less informative than it might have been previously, especially given that academic readiness is developed through pathway programs prior to and on entry to university.

2. Establish a national institute for educational research focused specifically on school teaching and initial teacher education.

- A national institute would enable evidence to be vetted by independent experts with a sufficient range of expertise to draw on a comprehensive body of high-quality qualitative and quantitative research nationally and internationally.
- A national institute could particularly pursue longitudinal research and seek strong practice-based evidence set within Australian schooling contexts.



- Such an institute would have an overriding mission to ensure that research findings were translated into useable practical advice for teachers, teacher educators, leaders and policy-makers. A national institute for educational research would provide critical infrastructure for building knowledge, capacity and community.
- This work would be specifically funded by government, establish cooperative rather than competitive relationships, and serve across the Australian curriculum.

3. Revise the approach to TPAs to ensure that all providers and their students are well supported.

- Adopt a more collective and formative approach to the development, endorsement and maintenance of teaching performance assessments to ensure all providers are successfully implementing a TPA.
- There is no inherent problem with the TPA being implemented in different ways given that all must be endorsed as meeting the requirement to assess the common set of standards. A range of TPAs supports differentiation and inclusion. However, not all providers have the same level of resources to design, develop, implement and maintain a TPA. The implementation of the TPA has required significant new work of ITE providers, particularly in benchmarking across institutions.

4. Reform the professional experience placements system to reduce costs and increase cooperative behaviour.

- Professional experience placements are an integral component of ITE programs, and all ITE providers devote significant infrastructure, administrative and academic resources to ensuring placements are successful.
- Significant resources are also provided by the profession through supervising and mentor teachers, and in-school coordination time.
- Efforts to address teacher shortages are often hampered by a lack of placements. One solution is developing specifically designed placement programs that address areas of shortage and attracting under-represented groups.
- There are a number of inherent vulnerabilities in the current system that could be collectively addressed to improve the placement experience for all parties. This would require a focused program of work and could make one of the most significant differences to the preparation of new teachers and the ways in-service teachers can support them.

5. Co-design explicit formal arrangements to support relationships between ITE providers and the profession.

- ITE providers already have strong relationships with the profession. Current and recent teachers are engaged routinely in ITE programs. ITE providers can and already do play a role in supporting teachers beyond ITE. This occurs through alumni engagement, provision of professional learning, joint activities with individual and groups of schools, and options for further formal study.



- Building from this foundation, more could be done to formalise and extend cooperative employment options to provide mutual benefit, for example through professional exchanges or joint appointments.
- ITE providers could also play a role in induction of early career teachers, for example through professional learning ‘top ups’ reinforcing and extending prior learning (particularly to connect theory and practice) and through networks of graduates to promote peer support. These would complement local induction programs.
- ITE providers can and already do assist with tailored programs to target areas of workforce shortage. These efforts could be expanded with more cooperation around particular challenges, such as securing placements and flexible study arrangements.
- Accrediting ITE providers for specific professional learning options, for example through ‘microcredentials’ and postgraduate courses, would add formal qualifications to the range of options available to teachers throughout their career progression.
- Formalising and supporting a career progression mapping from initial teacher education through induction and beyond to promote cooperation on key stressors at a systems level.

Questions Beyond the Scope of ITE

We close by acknowledging that some of the issues canvassed in the discussion paper lie not only within the purview and possibilities of initial teacher education. These include:

- *A concerted renewal of efforts to understand and address factors that adversely affect the status of the teaching profession and its standing in contemporary Australia.* This extends far beyond seeking to better market initial teacher education for the purposes of recruitment. Young people have more work and career options than previous generations, and teaching competes in that mix. The reputation for teaching as being increasingly difficult work with a lack of community support will do little to persuade prospective teachers and those that influence their decisions to take up teaching as a career.
- *Action to improve retention in the profession which addresses the loss of both early career and experienced teachers who leave to pursue other work.* High quality, ongoing employment for graduates and career differentiation that offers scope to continue to develop and pursue new opportunities with experience will be important levers.
- *Targeted efforts to recruit, prepare and retain in areas of known shortage or imbalance, including: specific curriculum areas, geographic locations and under-represented population groups.* These efforts need to include non-financial incentives and strategies to support career development. We already know a lot about how we could proceed, and many good ideas have been proposed and piloted over many years, but a lack of concerted action has left many of these specific challenges unaddressed.