



19 July 2021

Quality Initial Teacher Education Review Secretariat C50MA8

Department of Education, Skills and Employment

GPO Box 9880 Canberra ACT 2601

Australia

Via email: ITEReview@dese.gov.au

Dear Secretariat,

Quality Initial Teacher Education Review

Swinburne University of Technology welcomes the opportunity to make submission to the Quality Initial Education Review. Quality teachers are vital to a high-performing education system and to our national prosperity more broadly.

At Swinburne, we provide a wide variety of ITE options, and are committed to making these accessible to as diverse a cohort as possible, while also seeking to attract the strongest applicants.

Swinburne initial teacher education courses have achieved 5 stars in the Good Universities Guide for Overall Experience, Student Support and Teaching Quality. Graduate outcomes are strong with QILT data showing that 92.3% of ITE graduates have found employment after completing their course.

Background

Since the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group review a variety of reforms have been implemented that have strengthened quality assurance measures around ITE. These include adopting extra admissions processes to confirm the suitability of applicants to teach, as well as literacy and numeracy tests to ensure that those graduating ITE courses are in the top 30% of the nation. The vast majority of providers have also implemented Teaching Performance

Assessments to evaluate whether students are classroom ready. As a result, we can have greater confidence that those who are unfit to teach are not entering or graduating from ITE programs.

These reforms accompany an increase in the amount of ITE students commencing masters level courses, which means that a greater proportion have already demonstrated higher education academic success prior to commencing their programs. The creation of the Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD) initiative also means that the quality and availability of data relating to trends in ITE is improving, which will help to inform future decision-making in the area. Therefore, the sector is now in a strong position to safeguard the integrity of its ITE programs, and the Commonwealth, states and territories should have confidence that schools are being supplied with high-quality graduate teachers who are fit to teach. However, it is still a worthy aspiration to attract the very best and brightest to the teaching profession, and to increase the diversity of graduating teachers to reflect that of our nation. We have some considered suggestions for how this may be achieved, but before outlining these, it is important to dispel some commonly held notions that may distort understanding of the problems facing the education sector, and hence lead to inefficacious solutions.

ITE not in crisis

Public discourse around ITE and ITE graduates leads to the perception that these are programs in crisis. However, this view is not supported by evidence. Overwhelmingly, employers are satisfied with teaching graduates, more so than the average for higher education¹. Further, ITE graduates are significantly more likely to believe that their studies have prepared them for employment than their higher education peers².

Another misapprehension is that ITE programs are admitting hordes of students based on low ATAR scores. In fact, the average ATAR of students entering undergrad ITE courses has increased since 2015, and the majority of ITE students do not actually gain entry based on their ATAR³. Further, increasingly students are studying ITE at postgraduate level, which also has considerably higher rates of course completion⁴. Thus, ITE is actually in a stronger position than commonly believed.

¹ Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, Initial teacher education: Data report 2019, 2019

² Ibid

³ Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, *National Initial Teacher Education Pipeline: Australian Teacher Workforce Data Report 1, 2020*

⁴ Ibid

Teacher quality just one of many factors that influence the performance of the education system

While we should always be striving to improve the quality of initial teacher education, and the ability of teachers to provide quality learning outcomes, there is a tendency to cast too much of the blame for poor performance on teachers at the expense of other external factors. Focusing on one variable amongst many is neither reasonable or efficacious, and improving teacher quality is not a panacea for the complex intersecting social problems that impact the performance of our educational system. Pasi Sahlberg, Professor of Educational Policy at UNSW and former director general at the Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture, argues that most opportunities for improving education are in system-level conditions⁵. Therefore, we recommend that a review of ITE be complemented by other investigations into the disparate levers within Commonwealth control that also have a bearing on educational quality. For example, research demonstrates that countries with the most equitable education systems are also the highest performing⁶, which must be considered if the goal is to improve results. Evidence suggests Australia has work to do in this area, as principals of our most disadvantaged schools are concerned, they do not have sufficient educational resources. A recent OECD study reveals that Australia has much greater discrepancy between the level of concern that principals of disadvantaged and advantaged schools have over the availability of educational resources than most other OECD countries⁷. Revealingly, countries that had a smaller difference were generally the highest performing. Therefore, if we truly wish to provide our children with a better educational experience and achieve higher PISA results it would be logical to address deficiencies such as this.

Policy stability for admissions processes

While we appreciate the Government's intent is to ensure only the most suitable candidates are admitted into ITE, we suggest that a period of policy stability is required in relation to admissions processes. Swinburne has welcomed the measures introduced since the recent TEMAG reforms, but to best assess the impact of these measures, more time and evidence gathering is needed. If requirements and processes constantly shift, it is difficult to truly assess whether reforms achieve the desired outcomes. We also believe that the current standards for entry into ITE are sufficiently rigorous. Therefore, while we are not opposed to considering further measures in the

⁵ Pasi Sahlberg, *Are Australian students receiving the school education they deserve?*, 2020

⁶ OECD, *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*, 2012

⁷ OECD, *PISA 2018 Results: Effective Policies, Successful Schools*, 2020

future, in the short-term it would be prudent to allow providers time to refine what is already in place. This is also vital to ensure that any new measures are well-designed and based on as complete information as possible.

At a national level, we suggest that the Commonwealth use the Australian Teacher Workforce Data initiative to gather information on the impact of the reforms implemented as a result of the TEMAG report. This will help to ascertain the efficacy of current admissions processes.

However, there are a variety of other actions that can be taken at government level that could greatly assist in achieving the aims of the review; that is, to attract high quality candidates to ITE, increase diversity within the teaching profession, improve completion rates and encourage further professional development of teachers.

Making teaching an attractive profession

There are already many outstanding individuals amongst the ranks of the teaching profession and ITE programs. However, if we want to maximise our capability to attract the best candidates, it is vital to ensure that teaching is considered a desirable, high-status profession. Despite noble intentions, constant scrutiny of the teaching profession by both government and media may be counterproductive to this objective. The perception that is created of teaching as a thankless low-status profession in crisis is not conducive to attracting those who have multiple career options open to them. Therefore, we recommend that the Commonwealth, in collaboration with states and territories, take steps to improve the reputation of teachers within the community. This could involve promoting success stories of individual teachers, sharing student testimonies of how teachers had helped them and highlighting innovation in practice. Demonstrating to prospective teachers the positive impact they can have is a powerful advertising tool that may offset negative portrayals in the media.

Improving the status of teaching is vital not only for attracting people to teaching, but also to retaining them once they enter the profession. Given that teaching is a stressful occupation, the probability of attrition is increased if teachers feel that their work is unappreciated or even scorned in the public arena. This is a problem in Australia, as a Monash University survey found that 71% did not feel that the Australian public appreciates teachers⁸. One respondent

⁸ Heffernan et al, *Perceptions of Teachers and Teaching in Australia*, 2019

commented “*It is absolutely shattering when you’re working hard and with passion, following best practice, constantly building skills to ensure you are continually improving and caring deeply for the individual outcomes of the young people in your care to be treated as though you are substandard*”⁹.

There is also a strong correlation between how well teachers are regarded and student outcomes. A study by the Varkey Foundation found that in countries like Singapore and Taiwan where the social status of teachers was higher, students achieved better PISA scores than in countries like Brazil and Israel where social status is lower¹⁰. Therefore, increasing the status of the teaching profession will not only aid in attracting high-performing students to ITE, it will also help establish one of the defining attributes of a quality education system.

Importance of online options for attracting diverse and mature age students

It is also necessary to provide maximum flexibility if we wish to attract more mature individuals and be inclusive of those who have additional family and work commitments. Therefore, online ITE offerings are essential. Studying online opens access to those who may not live close to a university campus or be able to attend physical classes due to other commitments. Research indicates that those students studying online ITE are more likely to be older, female, from a lower SES background, studying part-time, and living in a remote or regional location than their on-campus counterparts¹¹. Now, one in four ITE students are online¹², which indicates that there is substantial demand for more flexible delivery.

Swinburne is a major provider of online ITE, and we are pleased to play a part in increasing access to ITE and diversity within the ranks of the teaching profession. However, it is our experience that there is much prejudice towards online ITE, based on the misapprehension that it is somehow inferior in quality to on-campus delivery and that students who graduate are not prepared to teach. Evidence indicates this is simply not the case. A recent study by researchers from Curtin University found that online ITE students achieved strong results in both their coursework and placements¹³.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also shown that teaching online is sometimes a necessity. Should there be further lockdowns, teachers who have themselves learnt through online education will

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Dolton et al, *Global Teacher Status Index 2018*, 2018

¹¹ Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, *Spotlight: The rise of online initial teacher education: what do we know?*, n.d.

¹² Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, *Initial teacher education: Data report 2019*, 2019

¹³ Pelliccione et al, *An evidence-based case for quality online initial teacher education*, 2019

be at an advantage due to their familiarity with this mode of learning. Teachers should also be encouraged to adopt technology and learning strategies that enable maximum flexibility for students in their learning experience, including blended learning options. Those who have graduated from online ITE courses are well-placed to implement innovative tech-enriched strategies in their classes, and we should view them as assets rather than liabilities.

Therefore, any reforms that make it more difficult to provide online ITE will not lead to an increase in teacher quality. Quite the contrary, it will simply lead to decreased diversity within the profession and the exclusion of many worthy candidates. It will also increase the difficulty in staffing schools in isolated locations as this is where many online ITE students are based. Therefore, it is vital that any policy changes in this area should be based on evidence.

Lifelong teacher education

While the initial education and training of teachers is undoubtedly important, so too is their continuing professional development. Therefore, we should look to cultivate a culture of lifelong learning among our teaching professionals.

Surveys of Australian teachers indicates that they are more likely to participate in some form of professional development over a 12-month period than their peers in most other OECD nations, which indicates that there is already a culture of continued education amongst our teachers¹⁴. Therefore, existing measures to support professional development of teachers are important and to be commended. However, there is room to provide more.

For instance, ICT skills for teaching is an area of need identified by some Australian teachers¹⁵. While, it has not been identified as a severe need, it is nonetheless something that is crucial to address as these skills are not static and require continual updating. Furthermore, due to the importance of digital skills to Australia's future, it is vital that our teachers are able to effectively embed them into their everyday practice. Therefore, we recommend that the Commonwealth also investigate the most effective means to allow teachers to upskill and reskill in utilising ICT in their teaching. This may involve facilitating the development and provision of micro credentials specially designed for this purpose that could be delivered by ITE providers.

¹⁴ Thomson, S & Hilman, K, *TALIS 2018: The Teaching and Learning International Survey – Australian Report Volume 1, Teachers and school leaders as lifelong learners*, 2019

¹⁵ Thomson, S & Hilman, K, *TALIS 2018: The Teaching and Learning International Survey – Australian Report Volume 1, Teachers and school leaders as lifelong learners*, 2019

It is also important to incentivise teachers to undertake further qualifications, either in education or subject-matter disciplines. This will not only increase pedagogical and content-knowledge expertise within the profession, it can also reinvigorate passion in teachers who may feel they are ossifying. These individuals may be more likely to stay in the profession if they feel there is opportunity for personal and professional growth. It also follows that if we are able to promote teaching as a career that allows continued intellectual development, it is more likely that we can attract the most curious and capable to the profession. Therefore, it is suggested that the Commonwealth investigate the most effective means through which the uptake of further qualifications can be facilitated. ITE providers have a variety of postgraduate options in education, and subject-matter disciplines already available to support such an endeavour.

Improving ITE completion rates

Many of the measures outlined above will also assist in improving ITE completion rates. By positioning teaching as a high-status profession with the possibility for continued personal and professional development, it is more likely that the strongest candidates will be attracted to ITE, which may result in higher rates of course completion. However, it is also important to be realistic. The professional placement element of ITE is demanding, as is the teaching occupation. Many other higher education courses will not place the same amount of stress on individuals and thus have a higher ceiling for completion rates.

Decreasing attrition among graduate teachers

The rigor and teaching experience provided by ITE places graduates in a strong position to succeed. However, the reality is that the first years of teaching are a very steep learning curve and graduates need continuing support. Thus, Swinburne concurs with the point raised in the discussion paper regarding the importance of official mentors. While teaching staffrooms are very collegial and there is much unofficial support provided by experienced teachers to younger teachers on a day-by-day basis, a formal system of mentoring is essential. It is vital though that this does not add to the already considerable workload of teachers. Therefore, we recommend that the Commonwealth, in conjunction with states and territories, investigate a model that provides time-allowance such as the UK example outlined in the discussion paper.

Recommendations

- 1. We suggest that in order to achieve the greatest impact on educational quality, the Commonwealth should adopt a holistic approach that takes into account the importance of equity and other system-level factors in addition to ITE and teacher quality.**
- 2. We recommend that a longer period of policy stability in relations to admissions processes is required to accurately assess the impact of the TEMAG review reforms and ensure that any further changes are based on as complete information as possible.**
- 3. We suggest that in order to achieve the goal of attracting the highest quality applicants, it is necessary to improve the public standing of teaching as a profession by:**
 - a. A concerted public relations campaign that promotes the positive impact that teachers have on their students.**
 - b. Investigating means to improve access to further postgraduate qualifications in education and relevant content-knowledge disciplines, so as to position teaching as a profession that allows for continued personal and professional development.**
- 4. To increase diversity within the teaching profession, and attract mid-career professionals, we recommend that the Commonwealth, states and territories recognise and support the importance to online ITE offerings.**
- 5. By attracting the highest quality candidates through the measures outline above, we suggest that the Commonwealth can also achieve its goal of improving course completion rates.**
- 6. To ensure that teachers upskill and reskill in utilising ICT in their teaching, we suggest that the Commonwealth, states and territories facilitate the uptake of specially designed micro credentials.**
- 7. To decrease attrition rates within teaching, we suggest that the Commonwealth, states and territories implement measures to further facilitate the provision of mentors to graduate teachers, such as the time-allowance model outlined in the discussion paper.**

We concur with the Commonwealth that the quality of our teachers and ITE programs are of great importance to ensuring outstanding outcomes for our nation's education system. However, when evaluating this system's performance, we must take stock of all impactful factors. Therefore, our approach to achieving better results must also be multi-faceted and harmonious. Focusing on one input while ignoring others will only lead to misdiagnosis and poorly prescribed solutions. While we believe the measures outlined above will help make teaching a more attractive profession, increase diversity and retain our best teachers, we do not feel that ITE or teaching are in crisis. We suggest that a system-wide analysis will reveal a multitude of reasons for Australia's performance in PISA rankings, and therefore the Commonwealth should craft an ambitious multi-layered strategy to address these.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this submission, and should you require more information please contact Government Relations Manager Tom Bradbury at [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely



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