

AASE Submission: Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper

The Australian Association of Special Education (AASE) is a broadly based national organisation that advocates for the provision of quality educational services for people with special educational needs. As such AASE strongly endorses the work of the Teacher Education Expert Panel (the Panel) and its vision to strengthen Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs to ensure that they deliver confident, effective, classroom-ready graduates.

In this submission AASE has focussed on three of the Discussion points from the Executive Summary.

- AASE is in full agreement that ITE program content should be evidence based and prepare graduate teachers to maximise student learning at all levels. AASE has a long history advocating for evidence-based practice in schools (see attached AASE position paper Evidence-Based Practice)
- AASE acknowledges the need to prioritise knowledge and practices which are essential for all ITE students. Proposed Core content should assist teachers to meet the needs of students with high incidence disability, often referred to as learning difficulties.
- While supporting Core content identified by the Panel, AASE notes that content specific to supporting students with disability is somewhat limited.
- In a recent review of initial teacher education in Australia, referenced by the Panel, teachers reported that some content in initial teacher education programs was not evidence-based and that they were not equipped with evidence-based practices in areas such as reading, classroom management and working with students with a disability (Quality Initial Teacher Education Review, 2021). To a major extent the Panel has addressed the concerns regarding reading instruction and classroom management, providing evidence-based Core Content for these areas.
- Ongoing development and delivery of ITE that reflects evidence-based practices has significant implications for the selection and employment of qualified and experienced University educators who are themselves aware of and committed to the implementation of evidence-based practices in the classroom. AASE is aware that this issue will require significant attention if there are to be effective changes in initial teacher education.
- AASE is obviously concerned in regard to the preparation of teachers to meet the educational needs of students with a disability. It is imperative that all ITE graduates are prepared to work collaboratively with parents/carers and specialist providers to assist them in meeting the legislative requirements under the Disability Standards for Education (2005). Skills and knowledge required for effective collaboration should be included as Core Content in ITE programs. Consistency of both course content and assessment prior to graduation across all

teacher training institutions would provide teacher graduates with foundational skills linked to evidence-based practice at a consistent level nationwide regardless of the ITE program attended.

- AASE is greatly encouraged by the Panel's inclusion of practices such as mastery learning, formative assessment and explicit instruction that have long been highlighted within special education research and practice. AASE also endorses the use of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework to meet the individual needs of learners. If teachers are to implement MTSS effectively they need to know how to support students at all levels, including the 6% needing intensive individualised instruction (see Expert Panel Discussion Paper p11), who in many instances will be students with disability and who need specialist support.

Supporting Students With Special Education Needs

- AASE recognises that the Review of ITE and the Panel's recommendations do not extend to supports provided to teachers and students in schools, but across education systems throughout Australia specialist teachers feature with the expectation that regular and specialist teachers work collaboratively to support students. Core content on collaborative practice should be a part of ITE including working collaboratively with specialist teachers, other professionals and teaching assistants as well as collaborating with parents/carers and students.
- As increasing numbers of students with disability are educated in inclusive classrooms, it is critically important that graduates are prepared to meet their needs. In the Expert Panel Discussion Paper (p11), it is noted that "The effective pedagogical practices defined in this paper are inclusive only of practices that directly relate to the learning, retention, and application of curriculum content. It does not seek to describe broader influences, content knowledge, family and community engagement practices or other enabling factors that foster engaged learning environments." With respect to planning and programming for students with disability (and others), the factors excluded by the Panel are of relevance and should be understood by graduating teachers.
- The Disability Standards for Education (2005), require Australian educators to make adjustments for students with disability in consultation with the family and the student. The 2020 review of the Education component of the Disability Standards (2005), reported a need to amend standards to "include principles on consultation" (Recommendation 2, p. vii). The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD), underpinned by the Disability Standards for Education (2005) necessarily requires collaboration and consultation. Given the inclusive nature of Australian schools, AASE believes that content related to collaborative practices/skills should also be a prioritised in ITE programs.
- AASE advocates for the inclusion of a compulsory unit in ITE education that addresses the instruction of students with disability and special education needs.

AASE believes that such a unit should focus strongly on curriculum adaptation, assessment strategies and instructional practices that have been shown to be effective in promoting student learning. It is crucial that regular class teachers are able to make adjustments and differentiate teaching strategies and curriculum to meet diverse needs. At times this may require the support of a specialist educator but initial teacher education could certainly be improved. AASE believes that teacher education courses must have at least one stand-alone unit that addresses pedagogy for students with disability and special education needs, preferably linked to a quality practicum in an inclusive setting with an effective teacher supported by a qualified special educator. Course content must include the legal obligations of schools and teachers, information on assessment, programming, instruction, making adjustments and collaboration with specialist teachers and teacher assistants. Support to increase the number of qualified special educators has the potential to provide more mentors to graduating teachers.

- In several states/territories there is a minimum requirement that all ITE students complete a special education stand-alone mandatory unit. The delivery of this unit appears to vary considerably in quality across ITE providers, depending on the strengths of each course provider. AASE believes that such a unit, along with the embedding of relevant content in other units throughout ITE courses will go some way to equipping teachers with evidence-based practices for students with disability. The evidence suggests that many early career teachers need more, not less, high quality preparation that is based upon special education methodologies to meet the diverse needs of their students.

Australian Government. Next Steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review. 2021. Available online: <https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-initial-teacher-education-review/resources/next-steps-report-quality-initial-teacher-education-review> (accessed on 27 February 2022)

Discussion

There is an opportunity to ensure all teachers learn in ITE the evidence-based practices which improve student learning. In addition, there is an opportunity for graduate teachers to be assessed on these practices as part of their final year assessment (known as the Teaching Performance Assessment) so that they develop and practice their skills in these areas.

To what extent would this strengthen ITE to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates?

- The degree to which ITE is strengthened will be determined to a large extent by Universities and the staff they employ.
- ITE is limited by the funds universities receive to support it. The degree to which ITE is strengthened will be determined to a large extent by the funding provided to Schools of Education (ITE providers) in universities to ensure they can retain and employ staff with the required expertise.
- It would be beneficial to provide funding that allows ITE students to attend professional conferences and professional learning.

- AASE supports the assessment of graduate teachers on their understanding and use of evidence-based practices as outlined in the Discussion Paper.

Discussion

There is an opportunity to improve the quality of practical experience in teaching through:

- developing more comprehensive system level agreements between school systems and higher education providers to improve the coordination and quality of placements
- developing national guidelines for high-quality practical experience
- supporting particular schools to specialise in delivering high quality placements who can share their expertise, and
- providing targeted support for ITE students with competing commitments, additional needs or studying in areas of workforce need to complete their placements.

To what extent would these opportunities improve the quality of practical experience?

- AASE recommends that all ITE students undertake a placement that provides the opportunity to plan for and teach students with disability. Ideally each such placement would provide a mentoring teacher with experience and qualifications in inclusive and special education.
- Ongoing collaborative contact between schools and ITE programs could result in stronger relationships with high quality placement opportunities.
- AASE would welcome the opportunity to collaborate on the development of guidelines for this specialist placement.

Discussion

There is an opportunity to strengthen the focus on improving performance in ITE by setting standardised performance measures for higher education providers and reporting publicly against them. There is also an opportunity to strengthen the link between performance and funding through the provision of financial incentives to encourage higher education providers to strive for excellence.

To what extent would these opportunities provide a strengthened focus on improving the performance of ITE programs?

- There is a risk that a requirement to report against performance measures could add a substantial administrative burden that takes time away from course development and delivery. A possible alternative is the requirement that universities make all course outlines and readings available on their websites.

With its highly experienced and wide-ranging membership, AASE is keen to support the development of ITE programs “to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates” who can support the diversity of students in Australian schools. Members of organisations such as AASE could potentially contribute to the evaluation of ITE course outlines specific to students with special education needs.