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Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network

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SUBMISSION FROM THE AUSTRALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION NETWORK (AECTEN)

Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper

The Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network¹ (AECTEN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper. AECTEN members represent a range of programs, and hence this response represents those programs that are inclusive of four to eight and four- to twelve-year-old children in primary school settings.

1. Strengthening ITE programs to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates

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?

1.1 **Evidence-based teaching practices:** Are there other evidence-based practices which should be prioritised in ITE programs?

Relying on aspects of relatively new evidence, such as cognitive sciences (Perry et al., 2021), to dictate future pedagogical practices is both limiting and naïve. There are numerous evidence-based practices in addition to those noted, for example, Cooperative Learning (Abramczyk & Jurkowski, 2020; Baloché, & Brody, 2017); inquiry-based practices (Dobber, 2017; Furtak et al., 2012); arts based teaching (An, & Tillman, 2014; Zakaria et al., 2019) and guided discovery learning (Casad & Jawaharlal, 2012). An eclectic approach to teaching and learning is required for quality teaching and learning.

It is important the content and teaching strategies of teaching areas (AITSL Focus area 2.1) remain flexible and responsive to curriculum, student, and development. Strong ITE programs must be designed to equip teachers to adapt their teaching to diverse Australian learners across the unique contexts of early childhood, primary and secondary. It is important

¹ See p. 10 for a list of AECTEN members and institutions.

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not to overlook the fundamental differences in human brain architecture (Harris, 2022), neuroplasticity (Castaldi, 2020) and epigenetics (Toro, 2015). Teachers must be empowered professionally through ITE to design programs that provide the informed, nuanced experiences and contexts required for ALL children to learn effectively, as articulated in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019). ITE programs must focus not only on teaching systems and strategies, but also on critique of a range of evidence-based practices so that graduates may exercise their professional knowledge and select and differentiate the most appropriate strategies in situ for the children or students they teach. This repertoire of pedagogical knowledge and skill supports the creation and maintenance of supportive and safe learning environments (AITSL Standard 4). Conversely, a limited provision of evidence-based practices will ill-equip initial teachers in providing quality practical experiences in teaching.

1.2 Amending Accreditation Standards and Procedures: How should the Accreditation Standards and Procedures best be amended to ensure all ITE students learn and can confidently use these practices? Should the Accreditation Standards and Procedures be amended to require TPAs to assess these practices?

“These practices” need to be limited to ‘evidence-base’ throughout the document, rather than specifying particular pedagogical approaches such as explicit mentions of EDI, which is not the most appropriate choice for all children and has been connected to disengagement in early learning (Ruscoe, 2021). AECTEN cautions against stating specific evidence-based practices in the National Program Standards as this can be limiting and unintentionally marginalise contexts and/or learners. As disengagement and school refusal (Tait & Hyde, 2022) are both rising in schools, restricting teachers from deviating from a whole school instructional approaches which become catalysts for these problems is fraught and stands to compound existing problems. As many schools now outsource to commercial programs, the significant financial investment has become a risky performance driver for schools committed to justifying spending through competitive learning gains, as it sits separately from and is prioritised over children’s wellbeing at school. It also risks limiting teachers’ power to exercise their professional judgement in the selection of the most effective pedagogical approaches for the unique context and cohort of learners. Recent studies reporting disengagement and occupational depression among teachers (Sowden, 2022) needs to be considered when proposing to reduce their capacity to exercise professional decision-making. Considerations also need to be given to students’ development and that pedagogical practices need to reflect each stage. A general statement referring to evidence-based practice will accommodate quality.

The Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA) was designed as a tool to assess the practical skills and knowledge of pre-service teachers. This current aim is inclusive of varied evidence-based practices in ways that demonstrate teaching impact. The impact of teaching is the end goal and indicative of quality, not the practice employed. *In sum, adapting the TPA to also measure evidence-based practices will detract from the original intent. The Accreditation*

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Standards and Procedures should not be amended to requires TPA to access the evidence-based practices.

1.3 Curriculum specific content: What steps should be taken to ensure curriculum-specific ITE content embeds the evidence-based practices?

There is an assumption this does not exist. Each state interprets curriculum differently to suit context and this is important to maintain.

1.4 Ensuring consistent, robust delivery of evidence-based teaching practices: What changes to the authorising environment are required to ensure consistent application of the Accreditation Standards and Procedures and implementation of core content in ITE programs?

The TRB in each state and ACECQA for ECS already do this. The more you try and make the same, the less professional teaching becomes and undermines the work of ITE to suit for context. Teachers are leaving due to not having autonomy and these ideas will exacerbate this further. *AECTEN welcome the inclusion of a central regulatory body (TEEP Discussion Paper, 2023, p. 22) to moderate evidence of accreditation (i.e., moderation of Teacher Registration Authorities procedures).*

2. Strengthening the link between performance and funding of ITE

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?

2.1 ITE performance measures: The standardised performance measures for higher education providers suggested by the report incorporate factors that reach beyond the control of universities. For example, reasons for student retention are often complex, inter-related and may occur regardless of university interventions (Beer & Lawson, 2017).

There are existing classroom readiness measures of quality e.g., the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) makes available robust, nationally consistent performance data for Australian higher education, helping drive quality improvement. Other sources of data include Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD).

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The collection of additional measures may be replicative, redundant and resource intensive. *AECTEN promotes a more coordinated approach to data collection/mining as opposed to replication of existing measures.*

2.2 Public reporting: This can result in the unintended use of data and the public reporting of standardised performance measures leads to a league table and as evidenced by NAPLAN results in schools; this results in methods that concentrate on product over the process of developing quality and diminishes teaching to ‘teaching to the test’. In other words, it reduces rather than increases quality. Studies who have examined advantages and disadvantages of league tables include:

Salmi, J. & Saroyan, A. (2007). "League Tables as Policy Instruments: Uses and Misuses", *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 19(2). <https://doi.org/10.1787/hemp-v19-art10-en>.

2.3 Public transparency: Who is the audience for this and what are the performance measures?

We are not convinced students will use publicised performance measures. As mentioned earlier, there is QILT data that is that is already publicly available. QILT uses the student voice to convey experiences, and hence will remain a more pertinent source in informing and attracting future students.

2.4 Transition funding to support performance improvement: How could transition funding be used to set higher education providers on a path to improving the quality of their programs?

The idea of quarantining additional funding within institutions is a good idea but again could contribute to high stakes of measures and this model has not worked in other contexts (e.g., NAPLAN). The opportunity to strengthen the link between performance and funding through the provision of financial incentives to encourage higher education providers to strive for excellence has been considered previously by the Gillard Government. As was the case then, funding to boost performance is ‘evidence free’ and counterproductive <https://saveourschools.com.au/teachers/gillard-and-garett-ignore-the-evidence-against-teacher-bonuses/>

2.5 Excellence pool for higher quality programs: How could a system of reward funding be best designed to support high performing ITE programs and encourage them to increase their enrolments? Are there any risks to such an approach and if so, how should they be addressed?

Highlighting high performance can attract enrolments, and quarantining that money is important but still puts pressure of already stressed academic workforce. *It is AECTEN’s view that financial incentives will only effectively improve quality when they are educative and not punitive.*

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N.B. It would be of concern if universities were rewarded for prescribing to a preconceived set of evidence-based practices.

3. Improving the quality of practical experience in teaching

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?

3.1 System level agreements: Would establishing more comprehensive system level agreements between school sectors/systems and higher education providers address challenges in the school matching process and deliver more effective placements? How could these agreements complement current localised arrangements?

Many providers already work with their placement school(s)/systems to achieve a rigorous approach (Standard 5: professional experience). Further coordinated partnerships with clear system level agreements to improve the quality of placements is welcomed. However, it needs to be noted that schools are autonomous to universities and while preventative measures can be taken, schools cannot be dictated to and there are resource/funding limitations for both schools and universities. *AECTEN agrees skilled teacher mentors are crucial to ensuring high quality experienced but emphasises that government funding is required to provide (increased) mentorship as well as to incentivise mentor teachers to engage in professional learning in mentoring skills. We also need to be mindful of burdening teachers already shying away from taking on students.*

3.2 Centres of excellence: Would encouraging centres of excellence, such as hub schools, support high-quality practical experience? What are the impediments to delivering these centres of excellence?

Impediments to centres of excellence include access to these models and varying views on what they may look like. Everyone needs to be on board to implement the changes.

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3.3 National frameworks: Would higher education providers, schools and teachers benefit from more specific guidance in delivering practical experience? What guidance would be beneficial to address key barriers to high-quality practical experience?

Barriers to high-quality practical experience include the imposition of inflexible practices. What would be beneficial is if Higher Education providers were supported in gaining funding of guidance in practical experiences

3.4 Student support during placements: What support for students would be beneficial to assist in managing their practical experience requirements?

Financial support needs to be funded to preservice teachers to take time off work to do placement. Out of box solutions need to be considered for regional, rural and remote settings. Having strict requirements limits flexibility, and will marginalise many educational contexts.

3.5 Integrating theory and practice: How can practical experience be better integrated with the academic component of ITE programs to support ITE student learning and preparedness to teach?

Schools need to implement the best practice as is taught in university context (not the other way around). Each Education course has a Course Consultative Committee which is a group of representatives from the sectors and systems who inform the university of industry needs. Placements should mirror what is evidence-based and being taught in the course. Again, this is contextual.

3.6 Role of schools in supporting practical experience: What incentives can be offered to schools to be more active participants in ITE placements?

Funding to release them from duties to engage in mentoring programs and mentoring preservice teacher(s). Mentors are too busy with overcrowded curriculums, increase in behavioural issues and additional work to provide effective mentoring. Providing time is the incentive.

4. Improving postgraduate ITE for mid-career entrants

There is an opportunity to attracting mid-career entrants into ITE by:

- enabling mid-career entrants to enter the classroom sooner as part of their degree
- developing evidence and provide guidance on the features of effective programs to attract mid-career entrants, and
- improving the flexibility of available postgraduate ITE programs to support mid-career entrants in managing competing commitments.

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To what extent would these opportunities improve postgraduate programs to attract mid-career entrants?

4.1 Better pathways for mid-career entrants: How can Masters degrees be structured so that mid-career entrants can assume roles in the classroom within 12-18 months instead of two years? What changes to regulatory arrangements are needed to enable this? Can shorten through accelerated and trimester but should not change requirements, rigour is essential.

4.2 Building the evidence base: Would a framework for assessing the success of mid-career programs assist in sharing lessons learned in designing mid-career programs? Any sharing of models is useful but not as a mandated requirement for change/adoption.

4.3 Increasing flexibility: Is their sufficient flexibility in providers delivery of ITE to cater to the circumstances of mid-career entrants? There are on/off options which allows this and part-time but options for working could be explored (not only for postgrad). However, once again, this will be in agreement with industry partners.

Thank you for considering this submission.



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AECTEN comprises leaders of early childhood teacher education degree programs in the higher education sector across Australia. It has five branches: New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory; Victoria; Queensland; Western Australia/Northern Territory; and combined South Australia/Tasmania, representing in total, 42 higher education institutions. Established in October 2016, AECTEN advocates for the delivery of high-quality early childhood initial teacher education and seeks to inform national policy on key issues relating to early childhood education and the early childhood teacher workforce. In December 2017 AECTEN began operating as a network of the Australian Council of Deans of Education. AECTEN upholds the internationally accepted definitions of early childhood – understood to cover birth to eight years of age – and early childhood teachers as degree-qualified teachers equipped to teach children from birth and up to eight years.

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