

Response to the Teacher Education Expert Panel on Initial Teacher Education Discussion Paper

Submission by David Edmunds

I worked as a secondary teacher, department head, deputy principal and acting principal over a 30 year career working initially in the Northern Territory, but mostly in Canberra in the senior secondary college system.

I taught most sciences, electronics and information technology.

I was involved in writing courses for most of these teaching areas, as is the practice in the ACT.

Following my resignation from teaching I worked as an educational consultant. The most relevant of these jobs was administering and analysing the ASPA teacher availability survey for some years.

This submission addresses sections 1 and 3 of the discussion paper.

While this paper is restricted to pre-service education, presumably the goal is to also identify a professional pathway for beginning teachers.

Reform Area 1: Strengthen ITE programs to deliver effective classroom ready graduates.

It is not possible to address the delivery of effective classroom graduates without the inclusion of the initial year of service and the establishment of a pattern of professional growth.

The underlying assumption of this reform area is that it is possible to produce teachers capable of undertaking exactly the same workload and level of workplace difficulty as the most experienced and capable of teachers. This is clearly nonsense and would be regarded as such in any other profession.

The reform area 1 goal should read: Strengthen ITE tertiary study programs to deliver graduates prepared to undertake an internship in schools.

The shedding of teachers after just a few years of usually casualised work is a key component of the problem with the teaching workforce in Australia. The teaching workforce therefore consists of a disproportionate number of teachers with low levels of experience. This is very costly and militates against the development of a high-quality experienced teaching workforce.

Initial teacher training includes blocks of time teaching another teacher's classes, usually supervised by that class teacher. As such the teacher in training adapts to the culture and practice established by the class teacher. The class teacher is usually selected arbitrarily, and not based on any particular skill in mentoring beginning teachers. Students are generally acutely aware that the practice teacher is just that and modify their behaviour accordingly. While useful, this experience falls far short of preparing a teacher for their teaching career. It does provide experience of school culture from the point of view of a teacher.

The use of newly-trained teachers to fill gaps in school staff on a casualised basis is catastrophic for their professional careers. It imbues new teachers with a just-in-time preparation practice, leading to very poor practice and is very discouraging, leading to high drop out rates. Such teachers are acutely aware that they are not progressing professionally, and are not receiving the positive feedback that comes from working with a group of students for whom they have a particular long-term relationship and responsibility.

The practice has been adopted only as a byproduct of the transfer of financial responsibility from central education offices to school principals. That is, it is not an intended feature of the induction of teachers into the profession.

New teachers should be employed on year-long contracts for their first year of teaching, on a reduced teaching load, perhaps 75%, under the mentoring of an experienced teacher who has been specifically trained and accredited for that role, and rewarded for this extra duty. This year should be seen as part of the teacher training accreditation, and viewed as an essential part of ITE.

During this year teachers might be expected to acquire additional qualifications, such as a Certificate 4 in workplace assessment.

While this will obviously be a more expensive option in the short term, it may well prove to be more cost-effective in delivering a more stable and competent teaching workforce.

Effective practices in subject areas

The Australian Curriculum does not provide the detail of what should be taught in each content area. It provides a broad overview. It should provide detail and deep resources such as texts or an on-line equivalent. Teacher training should include deep training on specific elements of this curriculum, or at least the interpretation of it in their state or territory. For example, training on the delivery of year 7 to 10 science might take a month of time in a semester course during initial teacher training. It is only through a deep analysis of curricula that teachers can develop the skills to develop a teaching program. There is no suggestion in the discussion paper that this should be part of ITE.

A teacher entering their first year of teaching should have explicit training in the areas in which they are to teach and available high-quality resources.

Any Australian adult who has experienced a high-quality school education will remember those programs and events that have occurred outside the formal curriculum, probably more than any other learning experience in their education. For example, participation in a school musical or drama event, sport participation or outdoor education amongst a host of other

possible experiences. Such experiences, led by committed teachers are a key element of schooling and enhance both teaching and learning. It should be a priority of teacher education to strengthen the ability of all teachers to leverage personal skill sets, such as sport and music, to advantage their ability to deliver extra-curricula programs. For example, teachers whose interest is sport or outdoor education should have a first aid certificate, perhaps a coaching certificate and even a bus licence. It sounds mundane, but is no more than other professions require as ancillary skill sets.

It is a fundamental part of schooling that students experience challenging situations, work closely with other students to achieve some personal goal such as a musical presentation under the leadership of a trained committed teacher. Education is far more than the delivery of prescribed curricula.

Further, involvement in such programs hugely enhances both the professional intrinsic reward to teachers and their professional competence, and in particular, empathy for their students.

Most secondary teachers have responsibility for a home group which will include pastoral care. This is implicit in primary teaching. As students progress to year 11 and 12 this responsibility will include advice on the formation of subject packages leading to the workforce or further tertiary study. For some students this may involve maximising their ATAR, for others it may involve experience in vocational programs. Teachers who progress from school to university to teaching will have little or no experience in how to best help their students, and virtually no experience of the wider workplace, career opportunities or even the Australian Qualification Framework.

Skilled, deep pastoral care is a parental expectation. There is ample evidence that a high priority for parents is that there is someone in a school who knows my child.

Any teacher training needs to include explicit instruction on pastoral care.

This section lacks explicit content on the recognition of difference and deficit in student learning, what it is and how to address these issues.

There is a quite astonishing level of naivety and wishful thinking in the section on classroom management. There are circumstances where even the very best of experienced teachers will not be able to ameliorate the worst of behaviour. The establishment of a school culture of good behaviour is ultimately the responsibility of the senior school administration and departmental managers. The experience of so many teachers who decide to leave teaching is precisely because they do not believe they have the support necessary to establish the environment they need in their classroom to succeed. Early career teachers need to understand that they should be able to demand support and learn to articulate the problems they have and work with senior teachers to address those problems. It is the role of the principal of a school, and senior school staff to define and establish required behavioural norms.

Far too often teachers feel abandoned, stressed and unable to do their job because of a lack of support.

The section on classroom management reads as if there is some magic solution if only teachers would follow the script. This is a deep abdication of responsibility.

It is a common lament of teachers who dread entering a class of 25 students that the class atmosphere and learning are being destroyed by one or two students. Such students are rarely affected by the practices described here. Teachers need to be able to identify students who do not respond to available classroom management techniques and engage senior school administrators to help deal with the problem.

Of course, dealing with particularly recalcitrant students is not part of any training received by senior teachers.

This is an issue of teacher empowerment which obviously is difficult to address in ITE, but should be part of any effective internship year.

However, it is crucial that ITE students understand that behavioural problems and particular learning difficulties are inherent in the school environment and the responsibility of addressing them is widely shared.

“Explicit Teaching” discussed in section 1.2, is the latest in a long line of terms to define teaching practice. It does not appear to bring anything particularly new, and the section here is not helped by the use of the passive voice. For example, it is not clear exactly who is doing the scaffolding. Is this a characteristic of the course and implicit in the teaching process, or something that the teacher is required to do when interpreting the curriculum?

There is a minefield here when cross-referencing to the national curriculum. For example, the first sentence of the first unit of the year 11-12 physics curriculum reads: “ understand how the kinetic particle model and thermodynamics concepts describe and explain heating processes” This is inherently unscaffolded. Even as a very experienced teacher of physics, I have no idea how to build from this sentence. I would suggest that the panel consider how the content of the first class in year 11 physics might be constructed in order to understand the problem.

The obvious way to address this problem is to invest in teaching materials that address the Australian curriculum, and in specific teacher training on the delivery of this material. This would also have the effect of feeding back into the refinement of the curriculum.

While the states and territories have the responsibility of interpreting the Australian curriculum, it is interesting that a quick look at the NSW and ACT senior physics curriculum shows only a tenuous connection to the Australian curriculum, and given the above quote, rightly so.

The development of high-quality resources also addresses consistency of interpretation of the Australian curriculum. If these resources exist they will be widely adopted.

Further, teachers should be formally credentialed on completion of teacher training in a specific element of the Australian curriculum, such as physics.

The evolution of the Australian curriculum into a system that provides deep resources, teacher training and accreditation together with a system that includes the best of teacher-developed resources will be very expensive. In addition to the establishment of a formal internship, this is one of the two fundamental keys to the improvement in the quality of Australian education.

Currently, the cost of interpreting the national curriculum in each state and territory is, in many subject areas unnecessary duplication, a railway gauge issue. This is particularly the case in science, maths and technology.

Using physics again as an example, there are texts that address in part the NSW physics curriculum. However, they cost between \$50 and \$100 for the year 11 component. This is beyond the ability of many public schools to fund. A brief look suggest that they might not be that good anyway.

Far too much time, and in particular the time of a beginning teacher is spent on reinventing the wheel. Teachers should be able to concentrate on the development of programs without extensively searching for materials that really should be widely available and introduced through explicit training. Teacher preparation should be focused on their particular students in their particular environment, not on the construction of basic resources, as discussed in the section on explicit teaching.

The absence of such resources leads to very poor teaching with an over-reliance on audiovisual aids that serve the joint purpose of filling the resource gap and student management, with perhaps only a tenuous connection to the curriculum.

Over the years there have been many attempts to distill what it is that characterises good teaching. The section in the discussion paper tends to

lose the wood for the trees. While a theoretical understanding of learning should of course be included, there are just a few basic things that ought to be in the minds of teachers, and of those who are responsible for teacher performance. These include preparation, scaffolding and inclusion, things that can be front of mind in a classroom. There is not very much more. There is a lot to the dictum: “tell them what you are going to teach them, teach them, tell them what you just taught them.”

Teacher workload, particularly in the early years of teaching is another factor driving teachers out of the profession. The preparation load is one element of an overwhelming and often pointless workload.

ITE cannot be considered without the context of the working environment of a teacher. Many of the items discussed in the areas of teaching practice should be inherent in that working environment. Teachers should have access to teaching materials that are designed around such practice, introduced as part of ITE with explicit training, following seamlessly into their teaching environment.

In conclusion, there needs to be a step change in the way in which teachers are inducted into the profession and trained to undertake a broader holistic education after decades of incremental review and gradual decline.