

Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is pleased to provide a response to the Discussion Paper issued by the Teacher Education Expert Panel into improving initial teacher education (ITE) and establishing the most highly effective ITE programs to enable confident and capable graduates well prepared to begin the next phase of their teaching journey.

Background

NCEC is the peak body for Catholic Education in Australia and is responsible for the national coordination and representation of Catholic schools and school authorities.

Working collaboratively with state and territory Catholic Education Commissions, NCEC advocates through effective liaison with federal, state and territory governments and key national education bodies. Our role is to ensure the needs of Catholic schools are served through funding, legislation, and policy.

Our work is to foster a thriving Catholic Education sector that offers parents a choice of, and affordable access to, faith-based education for their children. Catholic Education continues to advocate for fair and inclusive funding that sustains both government and accessible faith-based schools across Australia.

Catholic schools are universal in reach and open to all families who seek a Catholic Education. Australia's 1,759 Catholic schools educate one in five, or more than 794,000 students, and employs over 104,500 Australians. This makes Catholic schools the nation's largest provider of education outside government.

The Context of ITE and Schools

As the Discussion Paper highlights, ITE is an area of shared responsibility between governments, higher education providers, regulators, students, schools, and school systems. Each has a significant role to play in successful ITE programs. It must also be emphasised that initial teacher education (ITE) is but one, albeit extremely important, step in the journey to expert teacher. Any changes resulting from this review must be supported by ongoing commitment from governments, employing authorities and regulators to active and sustained support for the continuing professional learning of teachers, particularly in their early years as a graduate teacher.

NCEC strongly supports the Expert Panel's emphasis on evidence-based best practice and a data-informed, accountable and transparent approach to continuous ITE program improvement to ensure that all ITE programs deliver high quality experiences and outcomes for all ITE students.

Fundamental to improving ITE is adopting a strong partnership model between higher education providers, schools and systems, and ITE students, with robust collaboration and regular communication. NCEC notes exemplar models provided by existing productive and comprehensive partnerships including a well-established and impactful partnership between the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and the Catholic school systems in the NSW dioceses of Parramatta, Bathurst and Broken Bay. This partnership has resulted in high-quality ITE programs underpinned by active, collaborative support for pre-service teachers provided by the Higher Education Institution (HEI), the Diocesan systems and individual partner schools.

NCEC supports the Expert Panel in strengthening national guidelines for ITE programs in all jurisdictions by establishing greater consistency of focus, transparency and accountability around what students are expected to know and demonstrate. The existing Teacher Performance Assessment (TPAs) tasks are an important step in achieving greater national consistency and rigour in ITE programs. NCEC strongly

supports the continuation of TPAs enhanced with mandated cross-institutional moderation. Additional appropriate performance measures are also supported alongside the strengthened national guidelines to set expectations and promote transparency and accountability.

Response to Four Reform Areas in the Discussion Paper.

As noted above, NCEC works collaboratively with state and territory Catholic Education Commissions and has consulted with those jurisdictions in the formulation of this submission. Their contributions, often with a local jurisdictional focus, are incorporated in this NCEC submission.

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

NCEC strongly agrees ITE program content should be evidence based and endorses the four types of core content identified by the Expert Panel that should be prioritised in all ITE programs: the brain and learning, effective pedagogical practices, classroom management, and enabling factors including a foundational understanding of First Nations peoples, cultural responsiveness, family engagement, and diverse learners. Catholic school authorities also strongly support the proposed inclusion of evidence-based practices in literacy and numeracy and in the teaching of reading and writing. The mandatory inclusion of the effective pedagogical practices, including in literacy, numeracy, reading and writing, as detailed in the Discussion Paper are also supported for all subject disciplines and levels.

It is important, however, that the core content does not result in a reductionist approach to ITE programs. The core content should not occupy a disproportionate amount of time in the ITE program and preclude the opportunity for appropriate coverage of other equally important areas. These include pre-service teachers having a good understanding of the social context of learning as well as the issue of belonging and inclusion, particularly for diverse learners.

The Discussion Paper highlights the current variability in how each ITE program explicitly addresses each of the four proposed core content areas. The Australian Catholic University and Notre Dame University point to their existing strong focus on these areas. However, if as the Panel asserts, there is a lack of evidence of universal high quality and focused attention to these core areas in all ITE programs, the proposed core content will need to be of sufficient specificity to ensure consistent, focused and quality coverage of this critical area. It is also important that students can demonstrate their understanding of all core content areas and can demonstrate application in a classroom context. The role of the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) is a critical element of this demonstration of understanding and application. The TPA, as noted earlier, should be maintained and enhanced through cross-institutional moderation.

NCEC suggests that in addition to requiring ITE programs to explicitly and transparently include core content related to learning how students process and retain and apply information; the programs would be enhanced if they also explicitly addressed the developmental stages of children and young adults including the impact of trauma on brain development.

Given the increasing number of classroom students with diverse needs, often dealing with issues of trauma, diverse bilingual and cultural contexts and additional learning challenges, NCEC applauds the explicit focus of core content on the enabling factors for learning and classroom management. NCEC suggests this focus may be strengthened by ensuring these factors are situated within a clear positive mental health and wellbeing framework for all students and that ITE programs explicitly provide ITE students with the necessary understanding and strategies to foster positive wellbeing and mental health for all students.

The Discussion Paper makes scant reference to ensuring the quality preparation of ITE graduates to work and thrive in regional, rural, and remote schools and centres. NCEC proposes further consideration be given by the Panel to evidence and models of good practice such as those detailed in the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education, Department of Education and Training, Commonwealth of Australia, 2018 (IRRRRE)*. The IRRRRE recommends ensuring regional, rural, and remote contexts, challenges and opportunities are explicitly included in initial teacher education. NCEC believes this should be incorporated into the Panel's recommendations for strengthening ITE programs to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates.

Interaction with parents is a key area that Catholic school authorities have identified as requiring more attention in ITE courses. Early Career Teachers and parents have reported a perceived lack of preparation during ITE courses in the specific strategies for conversations with parents and carers, including how to interact with parents and carers, how to have difficult conversations, how to project warmth and confidence, and how to be inclusive of the parent and carer role. NCEC notes and strongly supports the inclusion of family engagement as one of the enabling factors for learning as part of the required core content.

NCEC is mindful of the extra demands regularly made on the ITE curriculum and is wary of an overcrowded ITE program. However, the Discussion Paper does not sufficiently emphasise the importance of subject specific discipline knowledge and pedagogy as a critical component of any ITE program. ITE programs must retain time and space for subject discipline knowledge, pedagogical understanding and application.

As noted in the Discussion Paper, ITE is situated in a complex multi-jurisdictional environment with multiple providers and programs which can make it challenging to ensure consistency and quality. NCEC reiterates its support for an appropriate explicit core content required in all jurisdictions as an important mechanism to support greater consistency and quality. Appropriate framework or template documents to provide clear guidance for ITE program developers may assist in ensuring greater consistency and quality.

Reform Area 2: Strengthen the link between performance and funding of ITE

NCEC supports assessing the performance and quality of ITE programs using a set of standardised measures but has concerns about linking these performance measures to funding. While an assessment and monitoring structure is important to ensure accountability for quality and outcomes and promote continuous improvement, there is the risk that tying performance to funding could result in adverse and unintended consequences. No compelling evidence is provided which substantiates a causal relationship between performance funding and quality outcomes. In the absence of this evidence, NCEC supports further consideration of enhancing current indicators such as the Teacher Performance Assessment and other suitable measures with publicly available data such as ITE student attraction and retention.

While NCEC is supportive of tracking ITE student retention and transition into the workforce, retention should be tracked until after the five-year mark when many early career teachers choose to leave the profession. It is also noted that the National Data on Attrition is different to the data some providers collect due to different measurements. For example, the national data looks at completion after six years, but this is not always a good measure as many students are part-time and may take eight years to graduate for a variety of acceptable reasons.

NCEC supports the notion that a ‘high performing’ ITE program is one that selects high-quality candidates and prepares them suitably for the classroom, however, it must continue to be emphasised that an individual with a high ATAR does not necessarily develop into a good teacher. Other factors need to be considered when exploring selection factors for high quality ITE programs.

Reform Area 3: Improving the quality of practical experience in teaching.

NCEC strongly agrees that professional experience is vital for ITE students. High quality school placements are the key source of this prior to graduation. NCEC urges the development of a comprehensive set of national guidelines, adopted by all Teacher Regulatory Authorities (TRAs), that would provide a clear framework for high quality, supportive professional experiences.

Our Catholic school authorities point to a range of other professional experience opportunities which have been introduced to strengthen the already mandatory professional experience days in both undergraduate and graduate ITE programs. These include both unpaid and paid opportunities for ITE students to experience a diverse range of in-school experiences. The case study provided below highlights the innovative and effective programs already being piloted. Consideration should be given to formal evaluation of such pilots and, where positive impact is clearly demonstrated, these could then be scaled.

The optimal time for professional experience is an under researched but critical area and there is wide variance in practice. NCEC supports further research in this area to provide a strong evidence base for such a vital element of all ITE programs. What is already clear is the need for much greater engagement and collaboration between higher education providers and schools and systems in a systematic and inclusive way which ensures all students and all schools are able to derive the maximum benefit from practicum placements, not just a select few students who are able to access exemplar programs.

Catholic Education Tasmania is currently facilitating an innovative program to support ITE students (see below). Elements of the program which have been critical to its success include guidance by expert mentor teachers, bringing the students together to support their well-being and successful completion of academic studies, fostering a good relationship with the partner universities, and offering financial support to each student.

CASE STUDY: St. Thomas Aquinas Teaching Schools Institute run by Catholic Education Tasmania (CET) offers part-time paid cadet teacher positions to a cohort of suitable preservice teachers each year. This model provides practical pre-service teacher experience along with one-on-one personal academic support that inducts trainees into the art and craft of teaching as they study together in a Christ-centred environment.

- Under the guidance of a mentor teacher, they work as a cadet teacher one to two days per week in a classroom. This amounts to a minimum of 160 days of paid classroom experience over a four-year degree.
- In addition to their weekly (paid) classroom experience, cadets come together each week for a further (paid) Insight intensive Day. Here they enjoy a community of support from fellow cadets and senior CET officers and expert educators as they are prepared to work as a teacher in Catholic schools.
- Suitable applicants also receive a yearly scholarship of \$2500 towards their study and are provided with a new MacBook for personal use.
- At graduation, all successful Cadet Teachers are guaranteed a permanent teaching position in the schools of CET.

Attracting ITE students to undertake professional experience in regional, rural, and remote areas is an ongoing challenge. This has a flow-on effect with students less likely to apply for teaching positions in these regions due to insufficient knowledge and confidence. Catholic schools in Rockhampton, Toowoomba and Townsville have implemented programs to increase pre-service teacher placements in their regions to both support a more diverse and enriching ITE experience for these students and also build confidence in more ITE students to accept teaching positions in regional, rural and remote areas. However, the increased costs involved (including travel and accommodation as well as time away from employment for the ITE student) are significant barriers to participation in such placements. NCEC urges additional targeted funding to HEIs and/or schools to support preservice placements in regional, rural and remote schools in all sectors.

One Catholic School Authority has reported some success with the National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS) project run by Social Ventures Australia in NSW and Queensland. This is an example of a program which has great potential, once rigorously evaluated, for scaling with sufficient funding and national or jurisdictional co-ordination.

Another model already in operation in some locations is based on school systems 'growing their own' and recruiting pre-service teachers from within their own areas and regions where the students already have established community links and support. One well regarded example is the ACU's "*Step Up Into Teaching*" (SUIT)¹ program through which students are recruited to work in their local schools. The SUIT program has operated in the Sydney Archdiocese for more than 20 years and is planned to expand to the Catholic dioceses of Wollongong and Broken Bay.

Another innovative approach which focuses on early identification and support for prospective ITE students is ACU's early entry university program. This program allows Year 11 students to study two units of ACU's ITE program for which they receive an unconditional offer into the ITE course and credits for the units. Many students who have engaged with this program are first in family to attend university and have benefitted from a transition-based pedagogy and supported early engagement with ITE.

NCEC considers a key aspect in the provision of high-quality professional experience is preparation of mentor teachers. A strategy to increase the quality of ITE professional experience needs to include an effective, manageable, and scalable process for the training of mentor teachers. Schools have indicated that additional resourcing and support is essential for supervising teachers/mentors to enable the time and space for constructive feedback and engagement in meaningful conversations.

As noted in Section 3.2.5 of the Discussion Paper, skilled teacher mentors are key to impactful and positive practicum placements. The Queensland College of Teachers provides training for supervising preservice teachers which has been extremely well received by ITE students, schools and supervising teachers. Expanding the provision of similar high quality training programs for mentor teachers is

¹ *Step up into teaching: Increasing the engagement and academic self-efficacy of school students from low socioeconomic backgrounds* by Miriam Tanti and Elizabeth Labone (2011) *Journal of Catholic School Studies* (83) 1, pp 64-73. <https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/item/8v17q/step-up-into-teaching-increasing-the-engagement-and-academic-self-efficacy-of-school-students-from-low-socioeconomic-backgrounds>

strongly recommended, including expansion to both preservice and beginning teachers in all areas including rural and remote schools.

NCEC strongly advocates that in addition to skilled teacher mentors for ITE students, high quality, evidence-based induction programs led by expert mentors are also vital to support teachers in their early years in the profession. Programs and funding for training and release should be provided to expert teachers for explicit targeted training in effective mentoring for both ITE and early career teachers.

Improve post-graduate programs to attract mid-career entrants.

NCEC welcomes the recognition in the Discussion Paper that mid-career entrants to ITE programs and the teaching profession contribute considerable professional and life experience to schools and students. Professionals who transition from other areas of the workforce to teaching form an important cohort entering ITE programs and moving into employment in classroom teaching.

A recent industry report from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, *Career-changers: Keeping them in the teaching profession*, cited research which indicates that teachers who have transitioned or are currently transitioning from other professions or fields into teaching constitute about a third of the teaching workforce internationally.²

However, as the Discussion Paper also notes, there appears to be little research in Australia which provides nationally consistent, rigorous data about the characteristics of this cohort or their numbers and percentage as a proportion of ITE entrants, graduates, and the teacher workforce. NCEC supports the expansion of the Australian Teacher Workforce Data to incorporate this information.

Mid-career entrants to ITE programs and the teaching profession are an important part of the mix in meeting the needs of the teacher workforce, and many schools and systems use strategies to attract, support, and retain high-quality professionals as part of workforce planning. However, while this cohort is growing it is likely to remain a minority source for providing teachers to schools and cannot simply be seen as a quick or sufficient solution for teacher shortage concerns.

As the Discussion Paper highlights, similar to other professions, mid-career ITE students face a range of significant barriers that can prevent them from entering and/or completing ITE, transitioning to teaching, or remaining in teaching. These barriers can be reduced but are unlikely to be eliminated completely. NCEC supports the use of a range of initiatives to address these issues.

NCEC supports flexible program options to attract mid-career entrants, particularly compressed programs which maintain program integrity and rigour but in shorter timeframes. Such compressed programs should be offered as an option to the current two-year postgraduate programs. NCEC cautions about broader adoption of accelerated programs through the various authorisation to teach mechanisms which may undermine the rigour and integrity of the postgraduate Masters programs and also expose individuals to significant professional responsibility without adequate preparation and support. Flexible options including accelerated or compressed graduate programs will necessitate additional close student monitoring and support for mid-career entrants who may be studying online or have other competing commitments.

Cost in the form of student-fee debt and foregone income is a particular barrier for prospective mid-career ITE entrants. NCEC recommends the Federal Government consider financial incentives or support for mid-career entrants to teaching through mechanisms such as student-fee debt forgiveness and tax

² Dadvand, B., Dawborn-Gundlach, M., van Driel, J., & Speldewinde, C. (2021). *Career-changers: Keeping them in the teaching profession*. The University of Melbourne, Melbourne Graduate School of Education: Melbourne, Australia.

incentives, as part of a long-term strategy to help ease the financial burden associated with transitioning to teaching. Such programs could be universal for mid-career entrants but also modified and targeted to assist diverse groups of underrepresented and/or attract entrants with qualifications in hard to staff subjects.

Additionally, the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, *Career-changers* report noted above, highlights that a range of critical factors need to be addressed to support mid-career entrants. These include managing a mismatch between expectation and reality, developing social and professional support networks through establishing strong relationships with colleagues, and achieving a sense of professional knowledge, autonomy, and confidence.

Programs to address some of these challenging barriers are already being piloted in several jurisdictions including the Queensland *Turn to Teach* program. Such programs could be expanded to other ITE students after current pilots are formally evaluated for impact and effectiveness.

Conclusion

NCEC commends the work of the Expert Panel and this opportunity to provide feedback on the Discussion Paper. NCEC looks forward to working closely with the Panel as it develops the final report and recommendations.

Should you have any further questions in relation to this submission, please contact me via phone 02 8229 0808 or via email jacinta.collins@ncec.catholic.edu.au.

Yours faithfully



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