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University of Wollongong Response to Teacher Education Expert Panel (TEEP) Discussion Paper

About the University of Wollongong

The University of Wollongong (UOW) is recognised internationally for the quality and impact of our education, research, and industry and community engagement. Among the top 200 universities globally, UOW is also currently ranked in the top 1 per cent of universities in the world for the quality of our graduates. UOW offers several initial teacher education programs at undergraduate (Bachelors) and masters (MTeach) levels, with expertise across the early years, primary, and secondary education. Our education students are provided the opportunity to undertake placements in a variety of settings, including local, rural and international placements. The University also offers postgraduate (MEd) specialisations for accredited teachers, school leaders, and other professionals. These programs include our highly sought-after Educational Leadership and Autism and Neurodivergence streams. UOW is consistently ranked among the best universities in Australia for teacher education. In the 2022 Australian Government's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), UOW was ranked second in NSW for Teacher Education. In the 2022 Good Universities Guide, UOW received five stars for Education and Training, with 88.4 per cent of graduates employed full-time within four months of finishing their studies. UOW is currently ranked in the top 200 universities globally for Education by Times Higher Education and QS World University Rankings by Subject.

Our partners

UOW enjoys close partnerships with the NSW State Education Authority (NESA), NSW Department of Education, and with the Catholic and independent school sectors. We have placement partnership agreements signed with over 300 schools in NSW, including the Illawarra, Sutherland Shire, Campbelltown and Southern Highlands. The University also has connections with primary and high schools in the Illawarra and across southern NSW via our regional campuses in Bega Valley, Eurobodalla, Shoalhaven, and the Southern Highlands. Staff and students at our regional campuses live locally and are deeply embedded in their communities.

Recommendations

Below we provide our response to the TEEP Discussion Paper, with recommendations made across all four areas of recommendation.

Feedback Area 1: Strengthen ITE programs to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates

The University of Wollongong welcomes efforts to ensure the continued rigour and high standing of our Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs. Consistent with the *Higher Education Standards Framework*, and particularly *Standard 3.1.2*, our programs draw on foundational and discipline-specific evidence bases.

Foundation studies in teaching are inherently multidisciplinary, with insights drawn from the cognitive sciences and psychology, sociology, history, and philosophy. We note and appreciate the extensive use of evidence, particularly from the cognitive sciences, to inform the proposed core content. Such evidence is essential for understanding the learner and offers important implications for practice (e.g. Mayer, 2001). We offer additional suggestions below to further enrich offerings for ITE students, with the view to developing a breadth of knowledge, skills and understandings about learners, their contexts, and the teaching practices that work best for them. These suggestions are offered in the spirit of promoting broad discussion and aim to propel ITE students into their teaching careers with a sound body of foundation knowledge about what works and why. We also note the need for regular review of this content over time, and we expand on this point below.

Additional evidence-based studies

We organise our proposal for additional evidence-based studies into two areas, noting that the proposed core includes not just teaching practices themselves but also foundation knowledge drawn from educational psychology and sociology about learners and their contexts.

Learners and their contexts

We note the importance of understanding human cognition, including how the brain processes, stores, and uses new knowledge in the pursuit of educational goals (Mayer, 2001). However, we also note the critical importance of socioemotional and relational factors in supporting and enabling learning. For example, recent research integrating insights from neuroscience, biology, sociology and psychology has highlighted the role of relationships in shaping learning and development, and the need to employ trauma-informed practices that support students to regulate stress reactivity: thus enabling learning to occur (Cantor & Osher, 2021; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Osher et al., 2020). There is also an important role for motivation and emotion in supporting cognitive processes, strategies, and achievement (e.g. Greene et al., 2004).

To support core content focused on learners and their contexts, we highlight the need for ITE programs to foster students' critical thinking skills and research literacy focused on standards of evidence. Paradoxically, there is evidence that teachers who appreciate the importance of neuroscience may be at *greater* risk of adhering to neuromyths (Dekker, Lee, Howard-Jones & Jolles, 2012). In Australian data, however, communication with academic staff about evidence-based practices has been shown to support ITE students' awareness of neuromyths (Carter et al., 2020). The capacity for evidence-informed critique would support ITE students' capacity well beyond their programs to make judgements about new research evidence and myths alike.

Finally, we highlight the need to include sociological and historical perspectives on learners' contexts. For example, Moll's Funds of Knowledge and Funds of Identity work (Moll, 2019; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) offers knowledge about deficit discourses and a critique of existing practices that continue to oppress. There is a need to understand cultural and racial diversity, linguistic diversity, and the impact of poverty on students' lives to ensure all students have access to high quality education (e.g. Souto-Manning, 2013; 2016).

Effective teaching practices

UOW strongly supports the focus of the proposed reforms on contemporary pedagogies, particularly in the areas of assessment and feedback (informing both teacher practices and student learning). We also appreciate the focus on scaffolded approaches that prioritise both teacher and student led learning experiences. The following feedback about literacy and numeracy pedagogies aims to broaden perspectives about 'what counts' for learners.

In the area of literacy, we welcome the continued focus on the five key elements of literacy and a firm focus on early reading. We also support the clearly articulated focus on literacy across the curriculum. We recommend the following complementary content for inclusion:

- *Pedagogies for teaching oral language*. Intervention data in low-SES schools shows that when teachers are shown how to support children's expressive and receptive oral language in the first years of school, literacy scores increase (Snow et al., 2014; also see Paastch & Scull, 2019;).
- *Maintain alignment of reading and writing.* Children's first "marks on a page" are established well before they come to school (e.g., Baghban, 2007), and NAPLAN results continue to demonstrate the need for greater focus on the early teaching of writing (e.g., Khosronejad, Ryan, Barton, Myhill, & Kervin, 2022; Myhill, Cremin, & Oliver, 2021; Ryan, 2014).
- *A broadened definition of reading.* Along with Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), we recommend including the Active View of Reading (Burns, Duke & Cartwright, 2023; Duke & Cartwright, 2021): an evidence base that shows phonological processing is essential, but not in isolation to the full repertoire of reading practices.

In the area of numeracy, we recommend that ITE students be taught how and when to use explicit instruction vs inquiry or problem-solving approaches: including the benefits of different approaches for different outcomes and at difference stages of the learning journey. In Ingram et al.'s (2016) "Anticipate, Launch, Explore and Summarise" work, for example, structured exploration activities which included questioning, investigation, and reflection were shown to enhance mathematics students' persistence on challenging tasks. Thus, while novices may benefit from explicit teaching to develop schematic knowledge (Kalyuga, Ayres, Chandler & Sweller, 2003), appropriately structured problem-solving tasks may support flexible engagement and persistence with difficult problems. In Martin and Evans' (2018) "Load Reduction Instruction", teachers are also encouraged to move to guided independence as students develop knowledge fluency. Taking these approaches together, it is important that ITE students develop conditional knowledge about what works for what outcomes and why.

Maintaining currency

One benefit of the current TEQSA and Teacher Regulation Authority accreditation requirements is the focus on current evidence. In TEQSA's Threshold Standard 3.1.2, for example, the content and learning activities of each course of study must "*engage with advanced knowledge and inquiry consistent with the*

level of study and the expected learning outcomes, including… emerging concepts that are informed by recent scholarship, current research findings and, where applicable, advances in practice".

To ensure that ITE providers are afforded opportunities to draw on the most recent and rigorous foundation evidence available, we recommend a mechanism by which any required core or foundation content can be regularly updated over time. Such a mechanism might include the convening of a panel of expert researchers from across Australia, who will be charged with the responsibility to regularly review and update content in line with recent research findings from foundation disciplines in education. We recommend a review cycle of 3-5 years and that the panel be adequately resources to undertake this work.

Changes to the authorising environment

In response to Reform Area 1.1, we note the need for any common or prescribed core content to include important foundation concepts from educational psychology, sociology, philosophy, and history. This expanded 'Foundation' could then be incorporated in Program Standard 4.2.

To report the inclusion of this content we recommend the adoption of a process like that used by NESA to capture the inclusion of Priority Area Elaborations. Priority Area Elaborations in NSW represent areas of important focus (e.g. Classroom Management, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education, Information and Communication Technologies) and are reported by ITE providers on a matrix template (Template 3A). Providers are asked to include evidence from specific subjects and from professional experience. Adopting this process nationally to report core curriculum inclusions would provide a mechanism for demonstrating and readily sharing coverage of foundation and core content.

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

Student diversity is a key goal for UOW, and we welcome opportunities to continue diversifying the teaching profession. We are particularly enthusiastic about the focus on inclusion for regional and remote students and for First Nations students. We have also seen the critical importance of a teaching workforce which genuinely represents the breadth of the community.

- At UOW we have four regional campuses across southern NSW, stretching from Wollongong to the Bega Valley. Many initial teacher education students on our regional campuses are the first in their families to attend university, and we have seen the enormous benefit such education can bring to regional communities.
- We fully support the panel's call to '*co-design actions to attract and retain more First Nations teachers*' and suggest this co-design be appropriately funded and extended to other diverse students including those who have English as an additional language or dialect skills (EALD) and those who are the first in their family to study at university.

While we are enthusiastic about the focus of recommendations in Area 2 on teacher diversity, we have concerns about the validity of retention data and self-reported classroom readiness as metrics of performance. Below we draw on international research that questions the effectiveness of linking performance to the chosen metrics. We note inherent tensions between increasing the numbers of diverse students choosing initial teacher education and increasing selectivity, for example. Performance funding based on the chosen metrics may bring with it unintended barriers to attracting diverse educators. We expand on these three concerns below.

Retention data

We do not recommend the inclusion of retention data as a signal of performance, noting that such a measure does not support the aim of delivering the highest quality teachers to the profession. Although retention rates in the ITE programs at UOW exceed national averages published by the Australian Government Department of Education, we nonetheless note that teaching is a complex and challenging endeavour. Some students may recognise that teaching is not for them before they graduate, and particularly following their first experiences in the classroom during PEX. Others may choose to transfer laterally from primary to secondary education or vice versa. Professional experience reveals this to students and to ITE providers in ways that are not possible from an entry interview or statement.

We further note that completion rates cited in Section 2.2.2 (p. 33) of the in the TEEP Discussion Paper are at risk of being misinterpreted. Completion data is compiled by the Australian Government's Department or Education (www.dese.gov.au) and considers students who have completed their program within a 6-year period. Because undergraduate ITE programs are 4 years, however, no part-time student will complete in that time. When 9-year completion rates are instead considered, retention rates are comparable to those in other disciplines (Dawson et al., 2022; also see AITSL, 2016, for similar trends over time).

Self-reported classroom readiness data

We recommend that students' readiness for teaching be assessed via independent and longitudinal observational measures and not by student self-report. With regards to the need for independent measures, QILT data 2022 shows that Teacher Education has comparable or better *student satisfaction* and *impressions of skill development* scores to other discipline areas, including Psychology, Arts and Sciences, Economics, Law, and others. Nonetheless, these scores must be seen as measures of satisfaction and not teacher capacity. Indeed, while evidence is mixed (Ma, 2022), some studies find that some ITE students' self-efficacy may drop as they come to understand the realities of the profession (e.g., Winters, 2012).

With regards to the need for longitudinal measures, we note the continuing nature of teachers' professional learning. ITE serves as an entry point into the teaching profession, but education professionals continue their learning throughout their professional life. The Australian Professional Teaching Standards for Graduates recognise this ongoing development, with graduates expected to:

- "*Engage in professional learning and improve practice*" (Standard 6.2),
- "*Engage with colleagues and improve practice*" (Standard 6.3), and
- "*Engage with professional teaching networks and broader communities"* (Standard 7.4).

In a recent national survey of more than 300 education professionals, conducted in 2022 and funded by a current Australian Research Council grant[1], a team of academics from UOW, QUT, Griffith, and University College London (Agostino et al.) also found that:

- 56% (very often or always) do new tasks that they haven't previously done.
- 70% (very often or always) follow new developments in their field.
- 82% (very often or always) reflect on a task after completing it.
- 79% (very often or always) learn from others by asking questions, observing, listening and discussing.

The average years of teaching experience among respondents was 7.5 years, which clearly shows that education professionals continue to learn as they work. Measures of readiness must reflect that teacher skill and development is an ongoing and iterative process which continues in the workplace.

Performance funding models

The introduction of performance funding to higher education in the United States has produced mixed results (Doughtery & Natow, 2013, Doughtery & Reddy, 2015), and does not have the strong evidence-base needed for implementation here. For example, a comprehensive review of performance funding in the US found that '*the research literature does not provide firm enough evidence that performance funding significantly increases rates of remedial completion, retention, and graduation*' (Doughtery & Reddy, 2015, p. 79). This same review also uncovered '*troubling, unintended impacts of performance funding*' including '*costs of compliance, a narrowing of institutional missions, grade inflation and a lowering of academic standards, restrictions on student admissions, and a diminished faculty voice in academic governance*' (p. 80).

[1] Research Project: "*Investigating professional learning lives in the digital evolution of work*", ARC Discovery DP210100164. Research team: Prof Shirley Agostinho (UOW), Prof Lori Lockyer (QUT), Dr Kellie Buckley-Walker (UOW), Prof Sarojni Choy, (Griffith U), Senior Prof Sue Bennett (UOW), Prof Allison Littlejohn (UCL).

Considering the available evidence suggests performance funding may not deliver desired results, we recommend the panel consider other approaches to ensuring ITE delivers excellence in the areas of focus. One such approach could be specific funding for targeted join initiatives that build from innovation and enable implementation by providers across the sector. As researchers and teachers, we have experience in co-designing evidence-based solutions that respond to new national priorities by drawing together our research expertise and professional knowledge and working closely with our partners who are expert practitioners. As one example we point to our successful collaboration between three universities and the NSW government to trial new ways of increasing engagement by ITE students in rural and remote placements (Deetlefs, 2021).

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Feedback Area 3: Improve the quality of practical experience in teaching

UOW strongly supports initiatives to improve the quality of practical experience in ITE. We welcome multiple suggestions made in the TEEP Discussion Paper related to Area 3, including the need for system level agreements, a focus on the intersection between theory and practice, and the need for mechanisms to be developed which better support schools to partner with ITE providers in delivering high-quality ITE placements. We outline our reasons for support below.

System-level agreements

The TEEP panel has rightly recognised the rising workforce pressures on schools and the impact of this on their capacity to provide high-quality placements. This in turn makes the process of seeking high-quality places enormously time consuming for universities with a significant burden also falling on schools. System-wide agreements are a crucial step in improving the capacity of universities to connect Teacher Education Students with schools and Supervising Teachers that can provide supportive, developmentally appropriate placement experiences.

In NSW, the Professional Experience 'HUB' model has produced positive benefits for schools, universities and ITE students (Daniel, Winslade, Auhl & Clarke, 2023; Winslade, Daniel & Hood, 2023). Notably, this system-based initiative provides:

- Additional funding to schools and universities.
- Dedicated staff to support PEX in schools.
- Professional learning opportunities for school-based supervising teachers; and
- Structured opportunities for all stakeholders to share best practice evidence.

Extensions of this model could also consider how to increase placements in rural and remote schools, and in specialist areas experiencing ongoing shortages.

Supporting schools to deliver placements

Recognising the centrality of adequate funding for placements is a key step in supporting schools to deliver high-quality placements in ITE. Modelling from the NSW Council of Deans of Education shows high costs to universities for each practicum placement. Funding shortfalls currently prohibit many of the best evidence based PEX models, including those from medicine and health which have a much greater funding allocation. There is a strong need for all stakeholders to advocate for funding to drive quality. Initiatives for consideration include:

- A system-wide need to consider and advocate for paid professional experience to relieve pressure on ITE students;

- Incentivising the best in-school supervisors to take on more ITE students by increasing remuneration and providing additional relief from teaching duties to bolster mentoring activities, such as co-planning, critical reflection and data-driven impact analyses.

- Investing in innovative, evidence-based approaches, such as Quality Teaching Rounds (Gore, Lloyd, Smith, Bowe, Ellis & Lubans, 2017), to allow schools and universities to induct ITE students into best practice approaches to pedagogy and professional learning.

Integrating theory and practice

We agree with that panel that quality practical experiences, delivered through a range of forms of work-integrated learning, help to strengthen ITE students' classroom readiness and preparedness to engage with the profession of teaching. The *Accreditation Standards and Procedures – Standard 5* provides clear expectations for providers regarding the centrality of professional experience in ITE degrees. Further areas for improvement in integrating theory and practice include:

- Paid professional experiences for ITE students, as is becoming common for medical students.

- System-wide agreements that support part-time employment (1-2 days per week), in schools, for ITE students, allowing for the design of sophisticated partnerships between schools and universities and reducing the potential for burnout and attrition (Lessky & Unger, 2022).

- Formalised arrangements, including ITE student scholarships and provider funding, to facilitate rural, remote and international placements and enhance the diversity of schools that ITE students have the opportunity to work with.

- Reviewing and removing any existing accreditation barriers that limit provider capacity to include placements early in degrees, as these undermine theory/practice integration.

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Feedback Area 4: Improve postgraduate ITE programs to attract mid-career entrants

UOW supports initiatives to develop flexible pathways for mid-career entrants and offer them targeted support to undertake and complete their degree. We also support new mechanisms to attract diverse ITE students to the degree at later stages in their professional lives. We caution that in considering the appropriateness of new pathways and approaches, the intellectual quality and rigor of ITE programs must be protected.

Degree duration, content and accreditation requirements

We support the panel's view that a Masters-level qualification, including a volume of learning amounting to 2 years, is the appropriate duration for a graduate-entry degree. To align with the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan priority area four, 'Elevating the Profession', we need to maintain the intellectual and evidence-based underpinnings of ITE programs and resist reforms that resemble an apprenticeship model. By offering intellectually rigorous programs, we argue that mid-career entrants may be attracted to join a profession that values critical thinking and the practical application of solving pressing issues in and for the world (Biesta, 2021). We agree, however, that further work is needed to better understand and address barriers to mid-career changers, and to ensure all graduate-entry degrees afford sufficient time to foundational knowledge about schools, learners and learning; aspects that universities are best-positioned to deliver. We recommend:

- Further research to systematically examine the factors that contribute to 'career changer' students' experience and success in ITE programs and beyond, acknowledging that new policy directions must be based on sound and rigorous evidence.

- Program accreditation requirements that affirm the need to balance intellectual quality and rigour with duration, ensuring all ITE Students have requisite foundation knowledge about students, their contexts, and the teaching approaches that extend from this knowledge (Evens, Elen, Depaepe, 2015)

Increasing flexibility and creating better pathways for mid-career entrants

Universities are already increasing the flexibility of their offerings for graduate-entry degrees, with a dramatic increase in the use of blended and online delivery. Initiatives that allow for concurrent paid work in schools and study at university are likely to meet some of the flexibility needs identified through research on mid-career entrants (e.g. QITE review, 2022). To best enable participation in ITE for mid-career entrants, we recommend:

- System-wide agreements that support ITE students to be employed in schools on a part-time basis (e.g. 1-2 days per week), allowing for the design of sophisticated partnerships between schools and universities and reducing the potential for burnout and attrition (Lessky & Unger, 2022).

- Initiatives that promote the enrolment of a diverse range of mid-career entrants and entrance requirements that allow universities flexibility when assessing candidature suitability for specific programs.

- Ongoing research into the challenges for students seeking to combine extensive work hours with study; a problem experienced sector-wide, not just in ITE. Broader solutions are required within the sector.

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Further Information

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