Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

Flinders University submission

Acknowledgement of Country

Flinders University acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands on which its campuses are located. These are the Traditional Lands of the Arrernte, Dagoman, First Nations of the South East, First Peoples of the River Murray & Mallee region, Jawoyn, Kaurna, Larrakia, Ngadjuri, Ngarrindjeri, Ramindjeri, Warumungu, Wardaman and Yolngu people.

We honour their Elders past, present and emerging.

Dear Dr O'Brien

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation Paper.

Flinders University has expertise in the development and delivery of curriculum across the whole life cycle of a child's formal education, from early childhood through to secondary school, offering undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in initial teacher education and continuing professional education.

Our approach is learner centered, inquiry driven and uses critical and reflective pedagogies to support practitioners who are adaptable and prepared for an evolving education system.

Further, Flinders is the sole tertiary institution in South Australia specialising in inclusive and specialised education for both initial and continuing professional teacher education.

Our role is to educate future teachers and we would like to continue to be involved in discussion on strategies to address the teacher shortage in Australia and strengthening our Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs.

Flinders University has strong research expertise across a range of priority areas including mental health and wellbeing focusing on children and adolescents, inclusive and special education, child development and learning/cognition.

We are well placed to build on this research to support the development of an evidence base for a revised model of ITE as well as training and upskilling for the current teaching workforce in areas of government priority.

We look forward to continued engagement on this important topic.

Kind Regards

Professor Deborah West
Vice-President and Executive Dean

Introduction

Flinders University is aware that a joint submission has been provided by the Australian Council of Deans of Education to which Flinders University has contributed, however we highlight that this submission contains the sole views of Flinders University.

The consultation paper talks to the importance of excellence, quality and equity and goes into detail in unpacking the quality of teacher education in general terms. However, the paper could go further to describe the impact of teachers on the experience of students beyond scores tied solely to cognitive engagement. For example, the parameters around excellence have not been sufficiently defined to allow for appropriate measures of affective engagement or personal and social competence. Equity is also another component that needs further unpacking particularly regarding the strong deficit approach taken in the paper to our First Nations communities and those who come from low socio-economic parts of our country. Of value would be consideration of the OECD learning framework 2030 (OECD, 2018) to consider the knowledge, skills, attributes and values required to support today's students thrive and shape their world.

Flinders University sees Excellence having three key components: Curriculum, Teaching Practice and Pedagogical Approach and Support. It is critical to define and set benchmarks against each of these prior to establishing measures. **Part 1** of our response to the discussion paper and the questions posed within are structured against these three components. **Part 2** specifically addresses the questions posed in Chapter 4 of the consultation paper. Finally in **Part 3**, we address the collection of data, and the setting and measuring of targets.

However, before we address excellence, we pose a question: ***What do we mean by 'quality teaching'?***

Research contests the term 'quality' and how it is used as a narrative to generate prescribed outcomes that focus on standards, performance, 'smart investments' and 'massive returns' (Dahlberg et al, 2013). "Quality is a universal formula, identified and distilled by experts for application anywhere or anytime to achieve standardised results" (Dahlberg et al, 2013, p. vii). 'Quality' can neglect multiplicity, context, and the complexity of working with Australia's diverse children and their families as well as taking a narrow view of the purposes of education.

If we are to reflect contemporary thinking, we need to move ***beyond 'quality'*** **to an approach of meaning making between educator and child in an informed and pedagogically rich environment**. Meaning making sees education settings as complex organisms reliant on context, culture, tradition and community. Munns and Sawyer (2014) also identify that for learning to be substantive, students must be engaged operatively, cognitively and affectively to genuinely see themselves as learners and successful in their schooling.

As a Higher Education Provider, we teach students according to the set of standards put in place by the Australian Institute for Teachers and School Leaders (AITSL) however there is a disconnect between the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) requirements (set by AITSL), the current school environment and best practice education. More needs to be done to reduce the gap between evidence-based best practice taught at university and the application of these in the school system.

Part One – Addressing Excellence

Flinders University strongly supports evidence-informed **education** and **practice** and our vision is in line with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Future of Education and Skills 2030 report (https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/).

Curriculum

The following questions have been considered in this section: 1, 19, 23.

Whilst we support the approach of having high quality curriculum resources available to schools, the supply of these resources doesn't lessen the load of the teaching staff and doesn't directly correlate to excellence in teaching. It is the teacher's expertise in the translation of knowledge in a contextually sensitive and relational way, for the benefit of the students and classroom environment, that is critical. To expect teachers to simply teach via a cookie cutter approach disempowers and devalues the role of a teacher and their expertise and is not conducive to encouraging contemporary practice or application of learning into current issues beyond the context of a school.

We strongly agree that practices must be evidence-based however make the distinction between <u>practices</u> within the classroom and the evidence-based <u>systems</u> that need to be embedded across the entire school. We also warn against the development and application of a single set of practices to be applied across the entire sector. What works in one setting does not necessarily translate to success in all settings, particularly when comparing metropolitan and rural schools. It would be of more value to ensure teachers are consistently comfortable with a range of teaching styles such as a spectrum of teaching styles as discussed by Mosston and Ashworth (2008) that enable them to achieve common outcomes for students whilst recognising the variety of ways that these can be achieved.

Pedagogical research that honours the very foundation of educational practice and is grounded in socially just practices has not been strongly supported in recent times as it often challenges the notions of neo-liberalism that is evident in current practices of accountability and reliance on high stakes testing to determine 'quality' (Rankin, Garrett & MacGill, 2021). A greater emphasis would create a bridging curriculum between subject matter areas, allowing for creativity and inquiry to continue to develop and be sustained through the curriculum to enable students to access contextualised learning as they make meaning in their experiences and see themselves as learners who can discover success.

Our students need skills and capacities that extend beyond the technical requirements of work, for example, interpersonal skills that are within the context of the environments, including critical and analytical skills. This has been represented well in our National Australian Curriculum, but the focus of 'quality' has neglected components such as the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities. Students need the skills to be able to contribute towards the type of world that diverse societal groups wish to live in. Society experiences rapid changes, therefore content-based teaching requires constant revisions and can quickly become redundant. Focusing on the development and maintenance of curiosity to explore the concepts through the world around us will nurture resilience, adaptability, social competence and problem solving required to shift with society's changes. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has outlined the 2030 Agenda for Education (https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/). This agenda proposes the development of student agency to foster socially and environmentally aware citizens. This is the education system that we are advocating for.

We aim to **authentically encourage educational risk taking** through educational policy and processes. To enable risk-taking, we must make room for students to move through liminality and wrestle with troublesome knowledge, requiring an expectation of messiness in learning. Only then can we expect students to move meaningfully beyond current states of knowing (Land, Meyer & Flanagan, 2016; Meyer & Land, 2003; 2005; 2006). At present the curriculum is overloaded and it is largely geared towards qualification. This means we do superficial tasks and activities and while teachers advocate for risk taking, students are highly focused on results in standardised tests. Picking up on the work of Biesta (2016) we need to make space also for socialisation and subjectification. This provides a more thorough, holistic education and is more likely to create the enabling conditions for the type of world people wish to live in.

Valuing all areas of the curriculum requires us to move away from reductive approaches that narrow our understandings of educational excellence and success. This must also extend to valuing the ways in which students experience learning and are empowered and enabled to demonstrate their understanding (Rankin, Garrett & MacGill, 2021).

Teaching Practice and Pedagogical Approach

The following questions have been considered in this section: 2, 6, 16, 18.

Students need to be exposed to a diverse range of quality educators, who each bring with them differing expertise and experiences. Students should not be subjected to the same teaching styles and evaluation methods, thus eliminating the one size fits all approach to education. Flinders University, through its initial teacher education degrees, is committed to ensuring pre-service teachers are well equipped, responsive to change and passionate about life-long learning to replicate the need for a more joyful educational experience for all.

Finland (as one example) provides the perfect opportunity to look at what successful public education could entail. There is an emphasis on foundational capacities, where students are provided with the time and scope to build the basics at their own pace. Students are respected as individuals, emphasis is placed on their own growth, development, health, and

wellbeing and not just on academic skills that align with qualification (Biesta, 2016). The goal is to develop the whole person which requires being socially, emotionally and academically capable. See further details at: Sahlberg, P. (2022), *The Australian school system has a serious design flaw. Can it change before it's too late?*

The role of the university is to prepare our students to be effective teachers. This includes the ability to replicate the flexibility required in schools across the sector. Therefore, the university needs to be able to equip pre-service teachers with an expansive pedagogical repertoire. Teachers require the time and space to take the learning encounter beyond the superficial to places that are authentic, relevant, and meaningful, enabling students to see themselves as successful learners (Munns & Sawyer, 2014).

Strengthened ITE programs will come as a result of programs that allow space for discovery and creation in ways to be able to apply these practices and strategies as described in models such as Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). However, there is little point in developing our future teacher workforce within the context of the desired evidence-based practices if there is not a significant effort made to ensure the educational settings they are moving into (both through placement and early career experiences) are consistent with what they are being taught through their degree. One part of the solution is to consider the benefits of 'play' discussed broadly in early childhood education and consider what could be achieved by 'teaching these approaches up' rather than dragging down narrowly focussed, high stakes testing that has the potential to influence a reliance on didactic approaches to teaching.

With the move toward 3-year-old preschool programs, we are further concerned of the potential for a push down of the Australian Curriculum into preschool. The preferred alternative is our suggestion of a **push up** of the early childhood pedagogy into the primary school environment to incorporate a specialised integrated play-based curriculum, ensuring alignment of the commencement of the Australian Curriculum alongside the use of the Early Years Learning Framework for children up to 8-years-old. These approaches that are inquiry based and learner centred in nature can then be more influential in the later years of schooling.

Support

The following questions have been considered in this section: 2-4, 8, 9, 12-14, 18.

Flinders University supports an education system that advocates for the wellbeing of **all** Australian children. We recommend that 'universality' be considered in terms of access rather than prescribed curriculum content, teaching and learning, so that all children have the opportunity to regularly attend an education setting that meets their individual learning needs. Universality can be defined as all children regardless of background or geographic location, accessing the same level and amount of care each week.

Support needs to be considered against the various stakeholders involved in the education and care of our children, namely the teachers and school support staff, the students themselves and the allied health professionals working alongside the teaching teams. Ultimately, to improve our student outcomes, we need more humans around the students with the relevant expertise. This does not mean increase the number of teachers. The school **system** needs to be resourced adequately to meet the needs of the children who require additional supports.

The application of a three-tiered multi-tiered support system (MTSS) framework in every school and classroom has the potential to benefit all children by providing an environment that is inclusive and meets their academic, behavioural and social-emotional needs (Schaffer, 2023). MTSS is based on frequent screening for progress, providing evidence-based teaching and data collection to improve outcomes for all students. A classroom that embeds tier 1 prevention strategies in academic, behavioural and social-emotional wellbeing for all students, will create an environment where all students are nurtured and supported. For those students who need additional supports and interventions, these are readily identified with data and the 'dosage' of tier 1 prevention measures increased, calling for additional support at tiers 2 and 3, depending on needs of these children. Supports should include connections made to the ancillary professional services available both within and external to the school environment.

For MTSS to be successful, alignment is needed to ensure clear understanding and common language between the trio of supports wrapping around our students, namely the school, home and any allied health supports in place. There is a clear need for further Professional Development in this space to support teachers and the broader school network to elevate a basic level of understanding of MTSS and to build their capacity to work in and across multi-disciplinary teams. This will facilitate a common level of understanding whilst respecting the professional expertise and scope of practice for each stakeholder. It also allows teachers to focus on their core role of teaching but provides them with clear connections to the available and required support systems enabling an integrated curriculum.

MTSS recognises the importance of the parent and community partnerships in the education of our children and successful integration of this framework across our educational ecosystem will support the strengthening and expansion of these partnerships.

We believe it is important to **slow down the learning** to allow for wellbeing and a growth pedagogy to take hold in students across all year levels. This approach would allow students to feel safe and supported, allowing for liminality (Land, Meyer & Flanagan, 2016) and the need to overcome initial failures to be accepted as part of growth, building social connections, and feeling confident as a learner.

The discussion paper focuses heavily on the mental health and wellbeing of our students however it is equally important to ensure the positive wellbeing of teachers and other staff in the educational setting. Support for educators needs to be on-going and collaborative in nature. Support needs to be tailored to contextual needs and involve a range of educational contributors. Time is precious in school environments and is more commonly being dedicated to a multitude of testing regimes and data gathering mechanisms that narrowly measure what students know at a given point in time rather than being concerned with how successfully they are engaging in learning.

Part Two – Our Current and Future Teachers

The following questions have been considered in this section: 1, 12, 15-22, 24, 25.

Our views conveyed in this section are reinforcements of our response to the Teacher Expert Advisory Panel. The concerns raised and suggestions put forward remain relevant.

Educational success needs to move beyond an audit culture that prioritises standardised tests. League tables and standardised tests have limited what teachers do and supressed flexibility and creativity, contributing to ranking students and schools in culturally and linguistically biased ways. Instead, educational success could use a learning framework where curiosity, aptitude for learning skills and the development of a lifelong learning journey is supported.

Flinders University's role is to educate future teachers. We are well placed to support training/upskilling for current teachers in areas of government priority. Such training can be offered as micro-credentials or award courses. A few examples include our expertise in inclusive and special education, STEM education and supporting positive mental health and wellbeing.

Additionally, we have strong research expertise across a range of priority areas including mental health and wellbeing focusing on children and adolescents, inclusive and special education, child development and learning/cognition. We would like to be involved in discussions concerning how to ensure quality assurance of teachers entering the workforce and the different ways the existing workforce can further upskill and engage in supporting their wellbeing. We believe that to achieve this, we need to provide future teachers with the skills that foster and enable responsiveness, and a framework that allows flexibility to adapt. Critical to this is the need to ensure the university is connected with public (and other) education systems and our regulatory bodies. This will ensure our placements provide pre-service teachers with the theoretical, practical and pedagogical capacities that are required by the profession.

All providers have proven histories of delivering a quality experience for students but face many competing demands. A key element is the complexity arising from multiple regulatory systems, priorities and processes. There would be significant benefit in aligning these systems and priorities to streamline the teacher workforce creation and upskilling process. This would support continued improvement (as current requirements are prohibitive to change) and free up considerable senior academic time to focus on high quality teaching and stronger engagement with schools.

There needs to be acknowledgement and work to ensure that teaching is a sought-after profession and not exclusive to a select few. We need to ensure diversity in the teaching profession to be representative of the super diversity (Morrison et al. 2019) experienced in our schools and classrooms. If school students do not see education as 'for them' and believe they are not successful learners, we will feed a negative spiral of experiences with education.

The current pre-service teacher placement structure places extensive pressure on students primarily in the form of lost income. This can be particularly felt by mature age students pursuing a career change or moving to teach in their area of expertise. There needs to be a change in the approach to placements to increase the attractiveness of teaching degrees. Flinders University would support more relaxed requirements around the time and intensity of placements to accommodate part-time or longer placements that provide greater ability for pre-service teachers to balance their study and work / family commitments.

Flinders University would further support the introduction of paid placements to assist both undergraduate and mid-career cohorts to increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession to a broader range of potential students. Should these incentives be focused on specific target cohorts and expertise, the scheme would need to provide flexibility to meet changing demands in the education sector with minimal regulatory implications.

Flinders University also sees the opportunity to use placements to develop communities of practice that enable students from different stages in their studies to engage whilst on placement to provide on-placement observations and contextual feedback of fellow students. We see scope to adjust the fraction of time pre-service teachers are required to be on placement, and to better allow the integration of curriculum into the learning. This approach can be further enhanced if we were to take a multi-disciplinary approach to placements within the school environment to address the support requirements outlined earlier in our submission.

Many universities, including Flinders, already offer accelerated pathways, however this has not dramatically increased the demand. We are keen to see the results from these early programs to better understand how to design our programs to ensure the outcomes are meeting the needs of the profession and education sector.

Another barrier that needs to be addressed is how recognition of prior learning (RPL) can be optimised to increase the entrance pathways that have potential to accelerate to undergraduate degrees for those without a recognised Bachelor degree to gain access to the Master of Teaching, however may have a wealth of relevant experience in education settings, e.g. Student Support Officers.

Ultimately, if we do not address the issues that are causing teachers to leave the profession (workload demands, disparity between what pre-service teachers thought the profession was like and the reality, current rates of burnout, messaging in the media) then we are not solving the issue. This again points to the need to ensure we are creating freedom within the Australian Curriculum to work with the child as opposed to simply recording academic progress and executing standardised testing.

Part Three – Measures and Targets (Data and Research)

The following questions have been considered in this section: 1, 5-7, 10, 11, 26-34.

Being classroom ready needs to consider the ongoing nature of learning to which teachers bring an element of professionalism. We must not lose the critical nature of relationship building that is difficult to document and measure. A second point that must also be considered is what we mean by classroom ready. Good practice includes the recognition of a need for ongoing development and the potential for changes in curriculum and practice. As such, classroom ready must not be a term that is viewed as an end point in training, learning and development.

The context under which data is collected, measured and analysed needs to carefully considered to ensure that the elements introduced or undertaken that provide support to our students and staff within the education setting are not turned into an end-point measure in a similar fashion to NAPLAN. This would again present the potential to narrow practices and discourage creativity and bravery in exploring educational practices. Originally designed as a tool to inform the application of targeted interventions, NAPLAN was never intended as a benchmark metric. Where is the evidence that high NAPLAN scores result in better education and career outcomes?

One of the key barriers prohibiting the attraction and retention of suitable preservice teachers are low wages and poor working conditions (Fenech et al. 2021). The **pay scale between birth-5 and school settings needs to be equalised**. Early childhood teachers employed in early childhood non-school settings have long experienced a lack of pay parity with teachers employed in schools. They earn up to $30,000 less than their primary and secondary counterparts despite having equivalent teaching qualifications and, in most jurisdictions, being professionally registered and accountable to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

Until pay parity is established, attracting, and retaining qualified and experienced early childhood teachers (ECT) will remain a critical barrier to the provision of high-quality early childhood education, irrespective of any other strategies that are put into place. ECTs will consistently seek employment in the early years of school to gain a higher income.

We are keen to ensure the measures of performance are not reductive in nature. For example, markers of scores in LANTITE may have no weighting for determining the success and quality of that pre-service teacher in the profession. Yet, we still hold LANTITE as the definite standardized test of a future teachers' ability to perform in the classroom.

We warn about using a wellness indicator that has a similar framework to NAPLAN and discourage measuring wellness at the same time. Anecdotal evidence indicates NAPLAN testing can evoke feelings of anxiety and distress and therefore any testing of wellbeing undertaken during the same window is likely to be skewed to the negative and not a true indication of a student's overall mental health and wellbeing.

Rather than attempting to measure a student's wellbeing at a point in time, it is recommended the focus is on measuring those things that are known to influence a student's wellbeing (Lizzio, 2006). It is also important to ensure the measures established remain within the purview of the education setting. This aligns with the approach of using MTSS as a framework across the educational ecosystem.

Innovation does not just happen, the numerous plans and consultations over the last twelve months articulate a need for research into education and the incorporation of evidenced-based decision making by teachers. The evidence needed to evaluate this discussion paper and all the other proposals requires clearly defined metrics and a research plan to measure impact and quality such as has been described here and elsewhere and to resolve different positions amongst stakeholders.

Targets can be grouped into pedagogical (i.e., impact of teaching practice on young people), governance (i.e., impact of education system framework on teaching practice) and can be sectioned by mid- and long-term expectations only achievable through longitudinal research. Thus, quality of a framework can be sectioned into teaching quality, as well as program quality and therefore avoiding the current problem that standardised testing causes on schools (i.e., schools focusing on good scores, rather than good teaching outputs).

Similarly, teachers need to be able to understand the value of research in society and learning, to the extent that they can inspire young people. The fact that it has been over 30 years since governments have recognised the need for quality STEM education yet have failed to deliver, evidences the need for teachers to appreciate the value of evidence-based decision making (Herschbach, 2011; Galanti and Holincheck 2022).

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