



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Australian Catholic University (ACU)
Submitting as a: Academic person or institution
State: NSW

Summary

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a leading provider of initial teacher education (ITE), educating more teachers than any other university in Australia and producing world class education research.

ACU submits that student outcomes in Australia could be improved by supporting the capabilities and performance of teachers. This can be done by:

- freeing teachers from the excessive burden of non-core activities in order to do what they do best – teach – through the delegation of non-core tasks to para-professional staff and final year teaching students working part of their final year as paid interns;
- placing greater emphasis on subject specialisations for all primary teachers;
- developing stronger knowledge in assessment so teachers can monitor the effectiveness of their work; and
- collecting better data on teacher attrition to gauge more accurately the reasons that teachers leave the profession.

ACU also highlights the national progress made towards guaranteeing the high standard of the next generation of teachers through the implementation of the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) recommendations. Recently introduced uniform ITE standards include:

- a requirement for transparent selection frameworks that assess an applicant's academic capability and personal suitability for teaching prior to admission;
- a final-year teaching performance assessment to demonstrate students have met the national Graduate Teacher Standards;

- a national literacy and numeracy test requiring all pre-service teachers demonstrate they are in the top 30% of the population for literacy and numeracy; and,
- a stronger regulatory regime with new standards and procedures to achieve accreditation.

ACU emphasises the importance of allowing these significant reforms to bear fruit and, together with other providers of ITE, would strongly oppose any recommendations that further regulates ITE just as recent reforms are being implemented.

ACU recommends the Review endorse the TEMAG reforms that are being bedded down and hold significant promise for improving teacher quality in Australia.

Main submission

Context

Australian schools have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years as national and international assessments have shown a plateauing – or even decline – in key measures of student performance.

In view of the importance of maintaining Australia’s international competitiveness as a high-achieving nation, Australian Catholic University (ACU) recognises the importance of the central task of this review: assessing how resources devoted to school education can be most effectively directed to improving student outcomes.

ACU is the largest provider of initial teacher education (ITE) in Australia, educating more teachers than any other university and producing world class education research. ACU is therefore well-placed to provide input into certain aspects of the current review, particularly around the preparation and productivity of the next generation of teachers.

Consequently, ACU’s submission focuses primarily around measures that can be taken to better support and develop the nation’s teachers, with a view to maximising their effectiveness in the classroom.

Background

It may seem surprising but teachers have not always been considered a central factor in student achievement. The landmark 1966 Coleman Report set out what became the dominant view – that family background (or socio-economic status) was the principal cause of achievement differences amongst students. While teacher and school quality were acknowledged to be relevant, they were not regarded as important to the same degree as family background.

Since that time, however, there has been a decisive shift towards recognising the importance of teachers in influencing student performance.

While research suggests that a student's innate ability may account for up to 50% of variance in achievement among students, the next greatest source of variance in student performance is now understood to be the influence of the teacher. This is estimated to account for approximately 30% of variance in student outcomes.

Supporting teachers

In view of the significant impact teachers have on student outcomes, ACU encourages the Review to recommend improvements to teachers' support systems and their professional development.

The best way to support teachers is to enable them to devote themselves more fully to their profession by freeing them from the excessive burden of non-core activities. In other words, teachers should be allowed to spend more of their time doing what they do best: teach.

ACU recommends a greater use of para-professional staff and final year teaching students (working part of their final year as paid interns) to allow more time for teachers to focus on teaching and learning activities. These ancillary staff could, for example:

- monitor and record student assessment tasks;
- provide technology and connected learning support for teachers in the classroom;
- help with home, school and community partnerships;
- help to develop and implement data management systems;
- assist teachers to plan and modify curriculum and learning activities for individual students;
- help with extra curricula programs and activities, such as road safety, nutrition, etc.; and
- assist with the coordination of professional experience placements for teacher education students and assist to strengthen partnerships between the school and ITE providers.

The NSW government recently recognised the importance of ancillary staff by committing \$50 million to free up principals from work that takes them away from instructional leadership. ACU recommends similar support be extended to all teaching staff through a greater use of para-professional staff and final year teaching students working as interns.

ACU also recommends a greater focus on subject specialisations for all primary teachers. The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) reforms currently require all primary teaching graduates to have at least one subject specialisation; however, ACU believes that all primary teachers, not just graduates, should meet this requirement. Strong discipline knowledge is a pre-requisite for effective teaching at all stages of learning, including for primary maths, science and literacy.

ACU also recommends that teachers develop a greater understanding of assessment processes and methodologies as part of their on-going discipline knowledge. The TEMAG report recommended that pre-service teachers be better equipped “with data collection and analysis skills to assess the learning needs of all students”. Yet ensuring that such skills in assessment methodology are held by all teachers, not just graduates, would benefit all students.

Addressing attrition

ACU is concerned about the number of early-career teachers who are leaving the profession.

Unfortunately, there are no reliable figures about early-career teacher attrition in Australia. Official figures in Britain, however, show that almost one-third of teachers who qualified there in 2011 had left the profession by 2016. A UK Parliamentary report noted that a key driver for teachers considering leaving the profession is unmanageable workload. The limited evidence available in Australia suggests that a similar issue exists here.

ACU therefore recommends the commissioning of research into the number of Australian teachers who leave the profession, particularly in their first five years of teaching, and their reasons for doing so. Accurate data about Australian teacher attrition may better direct future support.

Andreas Schleicher, the coordinator of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and current director-general of the OECD’s Directorate for Education, recently stated that the challenge for the Australian education system is “to make teaching intellectually more attractive”.

Schleicher emphasised that employers need to provide “intelligent pathways for teachers to grow in their careers”. He had previously observed that Australian teachers were not given the same opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, research literature on best practices, and reflect on their own practice and experience as occurs in other high performing countries. Australia also fails to rotate teachers through professional development and classroom time as other countries do.

Teaching remains a very demanding job. Accurate data about teacher attrition is a first step to acknowledge that, for many, teaching is an unrewarding profession. In the meantime, ACU recommends a greater use of para-professional staff to relieve workload pressures, along with better and deeper professional development in assessment and increased subject specialisation for primary teachers.

Supporting TEMAG

ACU strongly encourages the Review to support the federal government's TEMAG reforms, the implementation of which is being overseen by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). These detailed reforms are already showing significant promise for improving teaching standards in Australia.

ACU endorses the recent comments of Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham, who observed that "it will take time for the system to mature and the full impact of TEMAG to be apparent" but that "it's important to continue the momentum of the last two years, as we start to enter the critical phase of implementation".

TEMAG concluded that any student enrolled in an ITE course must demonstrate that he or she is "classroom ready" before entering the workforce as a teacher. Significant reforms already completed or underway to realise this vision include:

- new standards and procedures, endorsed by all Australia's education ministers, for the accreditation of ITE programs;
- a stronger regulatory regime to guarantee the quality of courses and the classroom readiness of pre-service teachers;
- a requirement for ITE providers to have transparent selection frameworks that assess both an applicant's academic capability and personal suitability for teaching prior to admission;
- a final-year teaching performance assessment to demonstrate students have met the national Graduate Teacher Standards; and
- a national literacy and numeracy test requiring all pre-service teachers to demonstrate they are in the top 30% of the population for literacy and numeracy.

The TEMAG report provided a blueprint for all stages of teacher education: selection for admission into ITE; accreditation of courses; and required standards for transition into the classroom.

Importantly, the TEMAG inquiry also rejected simplistic or arbitrary requirements for admission into ITE programs, preferring a rich selection method, and noting the importance of teachers from a variety of backgrounds entering the profession.

ACU specifically supports the TEMAG inquiry's evidence-based opposition to a minimum Australian Tertiary Entrance Rank for entry into ITE programs and strongly urges the Review to reject any proposal along such lines.

Conclusion

Teachers are a key influence on student performance. If Australia's students are to rank alongside the world's best, teachers must be allowed to direct their energies primarily towards classroom teaching. ACU recommends the use of para-professional staff and/or final year teaching students to free up teachers' time to focus on core teaching activities.

Teachers should also be provided with the support to remain in the profession and the capacity to make better use of assessment tools to guide their student instruction. An assessment should also be made of the number of early-career teachers leaving their profession and their reasons for doing so.

Finally, ACU encourages the Review to endorse the TEMAG reforms to teacher education, which are currently being implemented nationally and which should be given the opportunity to demonstrate their efficacy.

ENDNOTES

- i. Coleman, James S. et al. Equality of Educational Opportunity, 1966. U.S. Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education.
- ii. Hattie, J.A.C. (2003, October). "Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?" Paper presented at the Building Teacher Quality: What does the research tell us ACER Research Conference, Melbourne, Australia. According to Hattie's influential review, home accounts for about 5-10% of the variance "considering that the major effects of the home are already accounted for by the attributes of the student." Recent research has further discounted SES and attempted to distinguish it as a lesser category than innate student ability (see Gary Marks, Education, Social Background and Cognitive Ability: The Decline of the Social 2014, Routledge).
- iii. NSW Government, "School Leadership Strategy," NSW Department of Education, September 2017.
- iv. A Queensland College of Teachers literature review on the topic found huge variability in Australian estimates of the proportion of teachers who leave within the first five years, ranging from 8% to 50% (See QCT, Attrition of Recent Queensland Graduate Teachers, November 2013). For example, the NSW Department of Education says that only 8% of its permanent teachers resign in their first five years (See NSW Department of Education, Workforce profile of the NSW teaching profession 2015, December 2016, p.53). Yet the Department is comparing the resignation rates of beginning teachers to the

total teaching workforce rather than other beginning teachers. If NSW compared like with like, the resulting figure could be possibly as high as 50% (see, for example, Pallavi Singhal, “Why up to half of all Australian teachers are quitting within five years”, Sydney Morning Herald, 7 June 2017).

- v. Michael Savage, “Almost a quarter of teachers who have qualified since 2011 have left profession”, The Guardian, 9 July 2017.
- vi. House of Commons Education Committee, “Recruitment and retention of teachers,” 8 February 2017.
- vii. Andreas Schleicher, “Lessons to be learned from the world’s education leaders,” The Australian, 27 September, 2017.
- viii. Schleicher, see above note vii.
- ix. Eryk Bagshaw and Alexandra Smith, ‘Education policy not adding up: OECD asks what's wrong with Australia's schools?’ Sydney Morning Herald, 25th March 2016.
- x. Senator the Hon. Simon Birmingham, “Opening remarks to the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG)”, 14 September 2017.