

Response to Teacher Education Expert Panel discussion paper

Initial contextualising comments

Monash University's Faculty of Education makes a substantial, high-quality contribution to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) as well as professional development and advanced degrees for teachers in Australia, and is internationally renowned for the quality and impact of its educational research. Over the last five years, we have, on average, graduated seven hundred new teachers each year. More than two thousand teachers have also undertaken one of our Master's programs and ten thousand one of our short courses over the same period.

Our highly regarded ITE programs respond to contemporary industry needs and cater for a diversity of student interest and expertise. Our undergraduate ITE courses include Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary education, dual degrees in Early Childhood and Primary, and Primary and Secondary education. Our primary courses allow students to specialise in Inclusive and Special Education, and Health and Physical Education. Our Primary and Secondary degrees offer double degrees with Music, Science, Arts, Fine Arts and Business. Our graduate ITE courses offer Master of Teaching in Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary education, including dual offerings as per the undergraduate course offerings.

The Faculty's completion rates for ITE students are the highest in Australia, averaging between 72-75%. A recent survey of 600 of our ITE graduates showed that 73% ranked the effectiveness of their ITE course as good to excellent. We are ranked 13th in the world and no.1 in Australia for Education (Academic Rankings of World Universities by Subject 2021; QS World University Rankings by Subject 2022). This response to the discussion paper presented by the Teacher Education Expert Panel has been informed by internal as well as external consultation with key stakeholders.

Strengthening ITE programs to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates

There is an opportunity to ensure all teachers learn in ITE the evidence-based practices which improve student learning. In addition, there is an opportunity for graduate teachers to be assessed on these practices as part of their final year assessment (known as the Teaching Performance Assessment) so that they develop and practice their skills in these areas.

Discussion point: *To what extent would this strengthen ITE to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates?*

1. We fully support the desire to improve the quality of teacher education across Australia. Well-prepared newly qualified teachers are an essential component of the country's teaching workforce. However, they are not the 'solution' to the challenges presented to school system owners as well as political leaders by teacher shortages and teaching quality. Retention of teachers is the most critical issue facing Australia, as it is in other countries internationally. To address that challenge, a joined-up, longer-term strategy is needed that addresses working conditions for teachers, career structures and professional development, appropriate rather

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than punitive degrees of accountability, and salaries. We do not see this longer-term and joined-up approach evident in the discussion paper and other documents produced thus far. While it may be convenient to focus so intensely on ITE, it is not likely to yield the results the Minister is seeking on its own.

2. School systems and school leaders must be confident that they are recruiting new teachers who will succeed within their systems and schools and provide effective teaching for children and young people. The notion of 'classroom readiness', however, is problematic if the systems and schools expect the quality of teaching from newly qualified teachers that they observe from their experienced classroom teaching staff. While it is absolutely reasonable to expect newly qualified teachers to meet threshold standards of competence across all domains, it is also critically important that systems and schools develop robust frameworks for the development of high quality teaching and invest in the continuing professional development and ongoing support that is necessary for teachers to reach their full potential. Research now shows that teachers can be helped to get better at teaching well into their careers, refuting the assertion that they 'plateau' or resist further development. We focus on the notion of 'classroom readiness' because it is crucial to understanding why any attempts to improve the quality of teaching in Australia must take a longer-term approach and one that includes post-ITE professional development and improved working conditions.
3. Whilst we support, to the most part, the content underlying the specific recommended 'core content' inclusions, we have concerns about the use of the word *reforms* to categorise these recommendations. The recommended content is already embedded in the ITE programs at Monash University and the content of many other ITE providers in Australia. These are not new ideas and therefore not 'reforms'. A systematic review of Australian ITE course content could have better supported this discussion paper and, from our attendance at consultation events and subsequent correspondence, it would appear that no systematic data collection took place to support the assertions the panel made that this content is not already included. Additionally, comments by the panel chair and others made in this regard have been very disappointing.
4. Furthermore, a focus on the brain as core content is very narrow and does not engage with an understanding of the whole-child approach and child and adolescent development, which is crucial for a quality ITE learning experience *and* for effective teaching. Ideally ITE courses should, and usually do, provide content which focus on the social, physical, emotional, psychological and intellectual development of learners at various stages of their life. Modelling how this knowledge informs effective teaching is also necessary. Such an approach has been labelled 'cognition plus' – and it is attention to the 'plus' and the other dimensions of learning that are likely to make new teachers more 'classroom ready'. It is important that Australia does not follow the lead of England in this regard where mandatory 'core content' in early career professional development has been found to be irrelevant, repetitive and off-putting by the thousands of newly qualified teachers who have been required to undertake it (further exacerbating the challenge of teacher retention there).
5. We also question whether experts in the field would regard the research items relied upon in this Discussion Paper as 'seminal'. One is a report from a US lobbying organisation, 'Deans for Impact', that has been highly selective in the range of relevant research findings. In addition, the authors of the Perry review of cognitive science funded by the Education Endowment Fund in England cautioned readers and policymakers about expecting ideas from cognitive science

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simply to produce effective teaching. The relationship is much more complex. Given the wealth of expertise on these topics in Australian universities, it is very disappointing that these texts, in particular, were selected and so much emphasis given to them.

6. We of course agree that ITE content should be evidence-based. In Australia, for the most part, ITE educators' research is in their specialist field, is high quality, and directly relevant to the student teachers they are preparing. Australian educational research – much of which comes from those involved in ITE – is internationally renowned. These research-active teacher educators bring their research findings to their classrooms as part of evidence-based research-led teaching. This is a particular strength of many universities in Australia and should be celebrated.
7. Of significant concern is the unwritten assumption that there are major issues with ITE education course content in Australia that need to be addressed but also that addressing this issue of 'content' is the key to improving ITE in Australia. As we have suggested, a longer-term and more school- and system-focused approach is essential – both in terms of working conditions, salaries and career structures but also the role of all schools in mentoring ITE students and the opportunities that schools and systems offer for continuing professional development. We urge the panel to take this longer-term and more school- and school-system engaged view and not to go down the road of proposing a 'magical' content solution to improving ITE.

Strengthening the link between performance and funding of ITE

There is an opportunity to strengthen the focus on improving performance in ITE by setting standardised performance measures for higher education providers and reporting publicly against them. There is also an opportunity to strengthen the link between performance and funding through the provision of financial incentives to encourage higher education providers to strive for excellence.

Discussion point: *To what extent would these opportunities provide a strengthened focus on improving the performance of ITE programs?*

1. In general, the panel and the Minister should be cautious about heightening accountability and strengthening ties between performance and funding that are based on narrow measures. Experience internationally suggests this creates a compliance mindset among ITE providers which does not deliver the ambitious changes and improvements that are sought. The result is that **ITE providers do exactly what they are asked to do and no more**. The impact of high stakes testing in US, England and Australia on teacher morale, and the 'guilt-by-association' and rates of teacher attrition that result from high accountability, compliance-driven regimes suggest that the panel and the Minister should be cautious when recommending tight links between performance and funding. England, again, offers another cautionary tale where centralised prescription and high accountability have had two detrimental impacts: first, some universities have withdrawn from ITE as the financial and reputational risks associated with it were too high; second, a compliance mindset has been entrenched to the extent that, beyond the prescription, providers add little value.

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2. Instead, we would propose that the panel considers ways of incentivising ITE providers to be innovative in relation to some of the known challenges in the sector; for example, increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teaching students and, crucially, supporting them, beyond completion, to remain in the profession throughout the early career. As another example, the panel might consider incentivising universities to develop high quality mentoring in schools to support workplace learning by ITE students. We would recommend that the Minister's aim should be, over the longer-term, to encourage an innovation mindset among university ITE leaders and to bring out the best from the system.
3. The two proposed performance indicators for **classroom readiness** are highly problematic. Firstly, both measures for performance are based on QILT data which is notoriously slow to be released; 2021 data is only now being released to our university. Some of our programs are in teach-out mode or no longer offered by the time related QILT data becomes available. Secondly, making judgements about funding on these measures alone would be extremely unreliable without further contextualising data; for example, another pandemic/flood/ bush fire or other natural disaster which inevitably impacts on student satisfaction with a course and how prepared graduates feel for employment.
4. Two out of three of the proposed performance indicators for **transition** are potentially problematic. The discussion paper states that 'Transition refers to *entry* into teaching employment' and yet one of the indicators relates to *sustainability* of employment and employment in areas of highest workforce need. **How do these two indicators (particularly the latter) relate to *entry* into the teaching profession?** They are clearly measuring something different.
5. In terms of sustainability of employment, there is an expectation in this Discussion Paper that providers should continue to support graduates past graduation. Currently, this is the responsibility of employers, who work with graduates every single day, and should, currently, be working to support them and develop their careers. School systems – whether government or independent – should be taking responsibility for the development of their staff post-qualification. Government schools need to be funded at levels that make this kind of regular and ongoing continuing professional development a reality. It would be cynical to lay the responsibility for schools failing to support and develop their new teachers at the door of universities. However, there are enormous opportunities for universities, systems and schools to work together taking the longer-term and more joined up approach we have discussed previously.
6. In principle, as the panel acknowledge, **linking performance to funding** is problematic. The paper outlines three possible models and then lists all the reasons why each is problematic, which aligns with our position that this will not improve ITE education nor raise the status of teaching within the community. Other professions such as doctors, lawyers or dentists do not have the same level of performance and accountability measures attached to funding, even when lives are at stake. Imposing tighter links between performance and funding in ITE risks the consequences we mentioned in point 1 above: deterring universities from staying in the sector and operating at scale; and creating a compliance mindset that would decrease the capabilities of universities to innovate and, ultimately, contribute to a de-professionalisation of teaching. We do not believe the panel would want either of these potential consequences.

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7. Further, larger and more selective ITE providers like Monash University have higher than average retention rates, higher than average graduation rates and a wider level of influence and impact than some smaller ITE providers. Smaller ITE providers with more inclusive entry standards, for example, can fulfill a useful function in the sector by providing opportunities to specific groups in the population. Linking performance to funding will likely disadvantage those providers who need more support rather than less and lead to the teaching profession in Australia becoming less and not more diverse. Again, we don't think this is the intention of the panel's discussion paper but the issue of perverse outcomes to apparently simple performance-funding links needs to be considered very carefully.
8. We are strongly in support of diversifying our ITE student cohorts but doing so has financial impacts. The provision of extensive LANTITE preparation, extra pre and post tutorial support, individual assistance with task preparation or a broad range of welfare and personal support to students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds has major budget implications. If there are mandated participation rates for students who often require a wider range of supports to succeed, **then this must be funded appropriately.**

Improving the quality of practical experience in teaching

There is an opportunity to improve the practical experience in teaching through:

- *developing more comprehensive system level agreements between school systems and higher education providers to improve the coordination and quality of placements*
- *developing national guidelines for high-quality practical experience*
- *supporting particular schools to specialise in delivering high quality placements who can share their expertise, and*
- *providing targeted support for ITE students with competing commitments, additional needs or studying in areas of workforce need to complete their placements.*

Discussion point: *To what extent would these opportunities improve the quality of practical experience?*

1. To begin with, we would like to reiterate the points we made earlier and return to the issue of taking a longer-term and more joined up approach to the challenges Australia faces and that engaging with school systems and schools is crucial. From our perspective, following consultation with key external stakeholders, we make the following observations:
 - a) First, make the job of the schoolteacher 'do-able' and appropriately rewarded. Invest in teachers and schools. Shift from punitive to smart and responsive forms of accountability that don't destroy teachers' morale through over-work and stress.
 - b) Secondly, make ITE school placements a requirement for all schools and build the capacity of teachers to mentor and coach new teachers and help them to improve their teaching. We would support a funded national framework for high quality school placements and regulations that incentivised schools to form collaborative partnerships with schools.

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- c) Third, we urge the panel to reject the assumption that governments can improve ITE by controlling what goes on in university classrooms in relation to ITE curriculum 'content', or by simply mandating longer placements. Decades of research has found that it is the development of professionally useful knowledge (e.g. pedagogical content knowledge) that is crucial in beginning teacher development. Equally, the longer the placement, the more we need to build the capabilities of the teaching profession, systems and schools to mentor and coach the new teachers they are working with, and for longer.
- d) Finally, in this section, **First Nation** university students often have significant cultural obligations and responsibilities, and are often carers or parents, with an inability to undertake placements far from their homes. First Nation students should be supported by institutions to return to Country and undertake placements with schools in their own community. This would have significant benefits to the schools, the teacher educators and to the communities. It would aid in the quantity of First Nation teachers in general, but also and importantly, in First Nation Teachers working within their own communities' /On-Country. It would also see graduate First Nation teachers returning to these schools and students upon graduation. This would strengthen the quantity and quality of First Nation teachers in First Nation communities, which in turn, better supports First Nations students in those classrooms.

We provide below a list of suggestions to develop professional placement in schools:

- 2. There is a need to move to consistent national placement reporting and how many days a PST should spend in schools.
- 3. Diversify school experiences-ideally all PSTs should have a regional or rural placement, but **this will require appropriate funding to implement.**
- 4. The relationship between universities and schools is crucial-whatever develops from this work we need to continue to build partnerships to develop high quality experiences for both our PSTs and mentors and Organiser of Teaching Practice (OTP). For example:
- 5. Develop 'Super mentors' who are coached/supported throughout the year with a reduced load or increased payment, or both.
- 6. There is a need for a shared language and understanding of what is required as a school mentor.
- 7. Develop a consistent and shared process for selecting mentors rather than just a 'tap on the shoulder'.
- 8. The system needs greater targeted support for of OTPs – raise the profile, support them more strongly, provide increased workload, pay them appropriately.

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9. Develop stronger connection with OTPS and Professional Practice Consultants in provider universities. OTPs could then share their new knowledge with mentors in their schools.
10. Develop a 2-day course for school mentors. Government could fund selected ITE providers to develop a short school mentor course.

There is an opportunity to attract mid-career entrants into ITE by:

- *enabling mid-career entrants to enter the classroom sooner as part of their degree*
- *developing evidence and provide guidance on the features of effective programs to attract mid-career entrants, and*
- *improving the flexibility of available postgraduate ITE programs to support mid-career entrants in managing competing commitments.*

Discussion point: To what extent would these opportunities improve postgraduate programs to attract mid-career entrants?

1. These opportunities are already currently offered in the Masters' programs at Monash University. Providing in-classroom experiences from the first semester of their course offers mid-career entrants a way to evaluate their aptitude and interests in teaching early on in their study. It does not necessarily lead to them learning to teach 'faster'. While it is not currently possible to condense the course further due to AITSL accreditation standards, financial support and/or incentives for career changers could help learners engage more effectively in school life and the broader opportunities of study (developing peer groups, accessing on-campus resources etc.).
2. Flexible programs of study would support increased enrolment. However, schools tell us it is challenging to place students on days that suit the school timetable. The Innovative Initial Teacher Education program at Monash has not been able to run in 2023 due to a lack of schools willing to take on students in an intensive program of study. Schools have explained that fitting students into a school timetable is very difficult as they must be released for on-campus activities and classes. Our own aspirations are to extend the work-related learning in schools on these sorts of ITE programs – especially for career changers – but the schools must be supported (and funded) to help this happen.
3. All the initiatives listed in regard to mid-career entrants would be relevant to all **First Nation** entrants (undergrads and mid-career students). First Nation students have significant cultural, family, work, and community responsibilities. Undertaking unpaid placements, or not being able to work due to placements, or having time away from cultural/community responsibilities, have significant effects on First Nation students and their families, their wellbeing and their ability to pay bills/rent/mortgages. All of this contributes to high levels of First Nation teacher educators leaving teacher degree programs.