University of South Australia

SUBMISSION

Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper

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Contents

Introduction and background

The University of South Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Teacher Education Expert Panel (TEEP) Discussion Paper. The submission has been prepared in consultation with staff in UniSA Education Futures - the Academic Unit that delivers Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs and undertakes Education research.

UniSA Education Futures offers programs in Early Childhood Education, Primary and Secondary teaching, at both Bachelor and Master levels. UniSA Education Futures supports more than four thousand students enrolled in 2023. UniSA is ranked number one in South Australia for graduate careers in teaching[1] and is listed in the world top 100 for Education[2]. The research undertaken by UniSA Education Futures staff contributes to innovation in education and preparation for learning, supporting, and informing new approaches to practice in the ever-evolving education sector.

Opening commentary

There are many systemic issues facing teacher education and teaching practice in Australia. Most pressing are challenges linked to declining teacher numbers and teacher shortages at all levels, and across subject areas and geographical locations; and the need to improve representation from First Nations and culturally, linguistically, and socially diverse populations.

ITE providers have been subject to a substantial number of reviews over the past several decades, with successive Governments initiating policy targeting perceived areas of poor quality or underperformance. There has, however, been variation in how changes in policy have been designed and implemented. Examples of this include the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE), ATAR cut-offs, non-academic entry hurdles, and the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA). All these initiatives have culminated in a tightly constrained system that no longer has the flexibility to adjust for State and local contextual requirements. The added barriers for entry into ITE programs and continuous regulatory change has only served to increase bureaucratic processes in lieu of enacting meaningful change that is informed by the sector. These barriers are significant for many potential students, reducing the attractiveness of teaching as an option for university study and a profession.

Teaching is first and foremost about connecting with students. Learning itself is a complex process that is mediated by numerous intrinsic and extrinsic factors. The TEEP discussion paper over-emphasises the importance of perceived academic ability (i.e., ATAR and LANTITE). While academic performance is indeed an important consideration, the policy enactment to date has only served to create barriers and act as a deterrent for recruiting high-quality students from First Nations, and other diverse linguistic, cultural, and low socio-economic backgrounds, as well as cohorts from regional and remote areas.

The operation of LANTITE lies with a third-party provider. As such, universities are very limited in the types of support they can provide and have no input into the timing of the testing processes. LANTITE is cost prohibitive for many students. While university scholarships can provide support, students enrolled in ITE programs have less opportunity to complete these high stakes tests when compared to students with income support and/or who are not currently enrolled in ITE programs (see recent

[1] ComparED (QILT): Graduate Outcome Survey 2018-20, Full-time Employment Indicator (Undergraduate). SA-founded universities only.
[2] 2023 Times Higher Education Subject Rankings.

LANTITE policy changes[3]). LANTITE is unique in that students who do not successfully complete both components cannot graduate from their program, regardless of their academic achievement while at university. This places a tremendous strain on students and is the only example of this type of externally administered hurdle that can prohibit a student from graduating across the higher education sector.

The discussion paper fails to consider future education models and address the growing areas of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education, and digital and multi-modal education. These are all rapidly developing spaces that currently have a significant impact on how education is designed, assessed, and taught – from K-12 to vocational and university. It is very surprising that a focus on AI and digital literacy was not included in the discussion paper, while a highly specific focus on neurological development is. This is a missed opportunity to acknowledge the critical need for teachers to not only utilise advanced technologies in their practice but also how teachers can support students in learning how to use these tools effectively and safely. There is a wealth of research over many decades to evidence how the integration of AI, Intelligent Tutoring Systems and Learning Analytics in education can advance and enhance student learning outcomes.

The below outlines our feedback on each reform area. In providing this, we emphasise there is need for change and that any systems level change must extend beyond ITE programs to include transitions to employment – from early career to mid-career and beyond. When considering this feedback, we note that the alignment between the issues facing our current and future teachers, and the priorities and possible solutions outlined in the discussion paper is at times unclear.

Reform Area 1: Strengthen initial teacher education (ITE) programs to deliver confident, effective, classroom ready graduates

General comments

Reform Area 1 is based on the earlier Quality Initial Teacher Education Review (QITER) report, which suggested that ITE graduates felt under-prepared for practice. The TEEP discussion paper proposes that graduates would be better supported through a focus on evidence-based teaching strategies. UniSA also supports a focus on evidence-based practice, and our programs include a range of contemporary theory and applied research aligned to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITLS) Australian Professional Standards for Teachers[4]. However, we question the basis for preferencing the Reform Area 1 categories as core content. The notation of "core" inherently privileges some areas of the curriculum over others and consequently positions other content, contexts, and approaches as "non-essential" (i.e. not core). Our classrooms and teaching practice are constantly evolving and the ability to synthesise, critique and enact evidenced-based research requires what might be deemed a "core set" of reflexive, action-research skills, which is not included in the discussion paper, alongside a supportive school culture and responsive and informed leadership.

AITSL differentiates the level of proficiency for each Standard and focus area. With reference to the suggested content and practices below - graduates must demonstrate an understanding of how students learn. Coverage of this focus area includes key concepts from learning sciences, cognitive science, psychology, and neuroscience. At proficient level teachers use; at highly accomplished they select, from a range of options and referring to evidence; and at lead level they lead others. The

[3] https://teacheredtest.acer.edu.au/

[4] australian-professional-standards-for-teachers.pdf (aitsl.edu.au)

developmental continuum is critical. Reference to "evidence", therefore, in the AITSL Standards, only appears in the higher proficiency teaching levels. This is not to say that our Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) do not require evidence-based practice. More so there is recognition that analysing research and evidential practice is developmental and requires a strong foundation to identify how the outcomes and methods are not only rigorous but reflect and apply to their specific teaching context. Expectations of new graduates is different from those with years of teaching experience and here we stress the need for increased career development to ensure graduates are well supported in their transition to employment.

While there is recognition that the Reform Area 1 categories reflect only a component of the overall curriculum, we hold concerns that the specified content is a further regulated and audited approach that is then equated to a specified "number" of hours of student work. This practice would be reflective of the approach taken with phonics. There is a finite allocation of "time" within existing accredited ITE programs and any increase in regulatory requirements will result in the removal of other areas of the curriculum necessary to demonstrate the full breadth of the AITSL Standards requirements and to cover the Australian curriculum applicable at any given year level. Again, we note that the perhaps unintended privileging of some areas will certainly mean the reduction of emphasis or removal of others.

The brain and learning

Understanding how students learn necessitates coverage of many domains such as cognitive science, learning science, socio-emotional learning, neuroscience, and psychology. Reference to a limited domain of research does not benefit the practice of ITE graduates, particularly in culturally, linguistically, and social diverse settings. There is significant research over many decades on self-regulation or executive functioning in learning and we question why the emphasis on novice expert and cognitive load in lieu of other well-researched and evidenced domains.

We argue that engagement with a broad range of learning theories, including psychology, cognition and neuroscience supports our graduates to be adaptive in their design of teaching practices and to reflect the specific learning context and situation they are practicing in. We also note that our graduates are at the very beginning of their teaching careers and that there will always be trepidation as they transition from novice to expert teachers.

We would welcome reference to the need to support graduates in their transition into long term employment. Many graduates find themselves working in short-term contracts with numerous changes in school sites, teaching specialisation and classes. There is a lack of coherence that can better aid graduate transition.

When considering changes to the curriculum, the discussion paper makes no mention of the importance for digital literacy, or how technology can be effectively integrated to support diverse learners and aid development of self-regulation proficiency.

We strongly recommend the inclusion of digital skills for all teachers. The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is reflected in AITSL graduate standard 2.6. However, the explosion of AI in education necessitates a reconsideration of the AITSL Standards to cover aspects of how students learn with technologies such as AI (personal AI tutors); recommender systems; automated assessment and grading; AI well-being; etc.

Effective practices

Understanding how students learn ITE students need to understand a range of pedagogies and practices so they can make informed decisions about what works for their school and classroom contexts, as well as individual learners. They need to be able to critique different approaches and recognise that school and individual context matters. What works for one class and some students is not always directly transferable and modifications are need based on individual and group cognitive and social dynamics. Schools are incredibly diverse and a narrow approach of what constitutes evidence-informed teaching does not adequately prepare our graduates. For instance, there is no mention of neurodiversity and varied abilities within the discussion paper.

The emphasis must continue to be on developing ITE students' understanding of how evidence-based research can inform a wide array of teaching designs that reflect the schooling, class and individual context and circumstances. A major area of focus for ITE students lies in the design of assessment to gauge learning progress and the appropriate and timely use of actionable feedback. Unfortunately, the discussion paper does not currently make reference to how schools and teachers incorporate a wide array of technologies to support this endeavour, nor reference the super diversity of students and their variable needs.

The discussion paper also places a heavy emphasis on numeracy and literacy and the use of direct instruction. Again, there are other evidence-based practices that should be prioritised in ITE programs. We would argue in this regard that a focus on explicit instruction as a key practice for teachers contradicts the fourth core point regarding culturally responsive teaching.

We acknowledge that some content and circumstances require direct instruction, but not all. Teachers need to be able to respond to the needs in their classes, with a range of pedagogical approaches. While not disputing that direct instruction for math has merit in some circumstances, it does not promote other noted priorities in the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), such as critical and creative thinking, mathematical problem solving.

The evidence for direct instruction is based on the research by Kirshner and other works by Hattie and his use of a meta-analytic approach. This research is based on a particular 'instructional design' model. The work is not on teaching 'from the front' alone but a carefully planned sequence involving learner engagement, modelling, guided practice, monitoring and independent practice / transfer (Hattie 2009: 205-6). Although, as Hattie insists (pp.208-12) that inquiry methods and problem-based learning are less efficient for learning facts and concepts, he concedes that they are better for engaging students, understanding the principles that link concepts together, longer-term recall, applying knowledge,

solving problems, critical thinking, and scientific process. Reference in the discussion paper to strengthening direct instruction runs counter to the evidence and to building culturally responsive and more contextualised learning for students. Furthermore, the recent uptake of generative AI also calls into question many pedagogical models and much research is needed to understand the impact of generative AI on teaching and learning outcomes.

Classroom management

We support the inclusion of classroom management practices, which are already included in every accredited ITE program nationally. However, while ITE providers can and do provide students with a range of classroom management techniques, the actual enactment and practice of these lies within a school and classroom. Each school has a classroom management plan and norms, in which case a collective understanding of how social and class rules are managed is important. Furthermore, there is an obligation in the partnership between ITE providers and schools in which teacher education students are undertaking professional experience and then early career appointments, for schools, supervisors, and staff to provide guidance and model the practice as per the culture of the school and its policies and practices.

Enabling factors

UniSA ITE programs are strongly influenced by Culturally Responsive Pedagogies. We support this component of the discussion paper to ensure all ITE programs raise awareness and build capacity to understand First Nations Peoples, their cultures and perspectives, and the criticality of cultural responsiveness, family engagement and diverse learners. Similarly, other cultural groups' safety, enacted through suitable culturally responsive pedagogies is needed to ensure every student's entitlement to optimal learning conditions.

Amending accreditation standards and procedures

All ITE programs are required to include a capstone assessment noted as the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA). The TPAs are required to rigorously demonstrate how a graduating teacher meets the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers at the graduate level. Focus area 3.3 requires that PSTs must be able to use a range of teaching practices and it is an expectation that a range of teaching practices is included within a TPA. This should continue, however the teaching practices that PSTs use within their final placement and within their TPA should not be mandated.

Rather, they should be carefully selected based on the needs of the learners and the school context in which the PSTs are working. Within any unit of work, there should be a range of teaching practices used. PSTs should be able to speak to a range of these, along with the theories that underpin them. To use the TPA as a quasi-core competencies compliance check would be to disregard the complexity of teaching and learning and the variety of approaches needed and included and accredited in ITE programs.

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

General comments

This reform area requires very careful consideration. While the intention is to promote the uptake of ITE to under-represented cohorts, there is the very real proposition that this will achieve the reverse. It is unclear how the proposed measures will enable the identified cohorts of students to successfully complete an ITE program, and there is concern that the measures will disproportionally and negatively impact First Nations students, regional and remote students, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. It is uncertain how the proposed funding model and measures will improve retention and completion, nor what the weighting across the specific measures will be and the outcomes that this may drive.

The proposed funding allocation may inadvertently incentivise ITE providers to attract students that have the highest probability of completing. This will heavily influence criteria such as first year retention and completion rates. We are acutely aware that study interruptions and social and economic challenges disproportionally effect First Nations, low socio-economic and regional and remote cohorts, resulting in the need for increased resourcing of support measures to aid progression and completion.

Students from diverse backgrounds often require increased levels of support particularly early in their academic study, and funding should be directed towards these identified areas of need. Additional costs and barriers to ITE program enrolment, such as LANTITE, also militate against the need to attract students from diverse backgrounds.

UniSA sees the benefits that can come from additional funding to support the overarching goals related to student and teacher diversity. However, we strongly object to an additional league table that would further incentivise ITE providers to move away from the ideals expressed in the discussion paper.

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

General comments

UniSA is supportive of any reforms that can serve to support operations of placing teacher education students into schools and ensuring that the supervisory capacity within the school is available and of high quality. The inclusion of clear guidelines for supervising teachers supported by professional development and training would be added positives to increasing the practical experience for ITE students

UniSA would be supportive of the implementation of specified quotas for government schools based on staffing numbers. This would support ITE providers in modelling demand and supply overall and for students entering into specialist teaching domains. We recommend that school supervision is tied to the AITSL Professional Standards for Teachers higher proficiency levels of Highly Accomplished and Lead teachers (HALTs), and that there are obligations on all schools to offer supervision in partnership with ITE providers, utilising these standards.

The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG) in 2014 included several recommendations on increased national oversight of ITE program accreditation and teacher registration. At the time this was a positive approach, and in line with development of the Australian Curriculum and the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers as national initiatives. Reasons for a national approach included quality assurance, and to also support teacher and student mobility, and transferability of teacher qualifications and student learning. As an outcome of these recommendations, AITSL was reconfigured and provided with greater responsibility. It has remained the case, however, that state and territory jurisdictions continue to manage many aspects of program accreditation and all teacher registration responsibilities. When it was introduced, the TPA required AITSL approval, and a network of consortia as well as individual ITE provider versions of the TPA evolved. Regulation and accreditation of the TPA has been particularly onerous for all ITE providers, for what is basically a pass/fail test. This remains the status quo.

It is unclear how a national accrediting body would function in practice, and we note that the establishment of "consistency" at a national level is challenging as it removes consideration of the local context and may be a case of which current system(s) would be adopted. At present there are multiple TPA consortiums and even within a single consortium it is a complex process to moderate and document equivalency. To better support practical experience there is a need for greater coordination across levels of the education system, particularly between ITE providers, government, and individual schools. Such collaborations would help to generate a common understanding of the requirements and standards for specific placements throughout an ITE program. The ability to source placements and ensure that the individual requirements for each PST are covered is an overly difficult step. The school and supervising teacher workload is substantial and perceived benefits or at minimum professional obligation results in difficulties in placing students in optimal contexts.

System level agreements are desperately needed in a time of teacher shortage. School systems currently see the employment of final year PSTs as an immediate solution to the teacher shortage, but there is little agreement on the kind of mentoring, feedback, and supervision that PSTs receive during their time on Special Authority to Teach (SAT). The process requires further monitoring and support from key stakeholders (Departments, Principals, University) to ensure students do not suffer from "burn-out" before their career has even commenced, and that program design/architecture remains fit for purpose, if, for example, PSTs will be in schools and not on campus. National agreement on minimum operating standards or conditions are needed.

For some PSTs the allure of paid employment presents challenges that culminates in both short and long term consequences. At UniSA and other South Australian ITE providers, we are aware of multiple instances where PSTs on Special Authority to Teach are overwhelmed in attempting to balance teaching workload with the challenges in completing their final year of academic study. As a result, they became disenchanted with the profession and withdrew from their program of study. There are also cases where students are not in their final year- such as third year Bachelor students, who are encouraged into SAT arrangements, especially in regions where there are chronic teacher shortages.

Any future consideration of paid employment pathways must also reflect an appropriate workload requirement and dedicated support structures given the level of experience of the PST and the variation in schooling contexts. Additional funding for students from diverse cohorts (e.g. First Nations students, students with special needs, students from refugee and migrant backgrounds, single parents etc.) to undertake placements, which can be flexibly deployed, would support them to remain engaged and successfully complete their ITE program.

Reform Area 4: Improve postgraduate ITE programs for mid-career entrants.

General comments

UniSA is supportive of any measures that serve to increase teacher workforce numbers. However, these measures must balance the need to continue to attract students into undergraduate ITE programs and recruit students from other undergraduate degrees into post-graduate offerings. Over incentivising a mid-career change may have a negative impact on the recruitment strategies targeting other cohorts and specific career-changers if they are not well supported and prepared for the challenges of teaching in complex schools.

The TEEP discussion paper argues that professional mid-career changers are unduly impacted by life commitments and therefore require added incentives. However, we would note that the majority of students undertaking ITE undergraduate or postgraduate study also face many significant challenges progressing their academic career, particularly our First Nations, and regional and rural PSTs.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper. For further information, please contact:

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