

# FUTURE TENSE

Higher education is in the midst for review, but the outlook for teachers is not particularly promising. Sharon Aris reports.

**T**eachers are the largest professional occupational group in Australia and they frequently comprise the largest group of post-graduate students at university. Two federal reviews of higher education and the recent federal budget are shaking up the sector, with major implications for the way teachers are obtained, trained and retained.

Judging by the interim reports and changes already announced in the recent budget, it's mixed news for AEU members. On the plus side, there is at least some official acknowledgement of the looming crisis in teacher numbers. But the extent of the acknowledgement is very limited, says AEU Federal Research Officer Roy Martin. "The government is in denial," he says.

While teaching was listed as a National Priority Area in the budget, the promised reforms don't go far enough. At the time of printing the details of the budget package and Minister Brendan Nelson's policy statement are still sketchy. Extra places in teaching courses have been promised, though how many and where they will be located may not be known until next year.

There is also talk of creating incentives to study teaching such as changing the way HECS is charged for teachers, and offering scholarships. But such sweeteners would come at the price of deregulated fees for most students and increases in the numbers of full fee-paying students.

It is also likely that the way teaching institutions are funded will change, with a greater emphasis on teaching practice, possibly at the expense of research.

## Broad-ranging reviews

The two reviews are both administered by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and

Training (DEST). They are called the "Higher Education at the Crossroads: a review of Australian higher education" and the "Review of Teaching and Teacher Education".

Crossroads is a broad-ranging inquiry that received over 800 submissions and includes seven discussion papers. The papers canvass everything from changes to the way universities receive funding, how students pay for their education, and alterations to university structure and teaching. The first part of the teacher-education review focuses on science, maths and technology and the recruitment and retention of teachers in these fields. The second part of the review looks at an innovation action plan for schools.

## Looming teacher shortage

The shortage of national and international teacher numbers is expected to become critical by 2005–2007. The teacher-education interim report notes that the current shortage of teachers with science skills and knowledge is already being linked to declining student participation in that subject area.

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The report lists the possible methods used to entice people into teaching science, maths and technology such as financial incentives by employers, scholarships, arrangements to pay specialist teachers' accumulated HECS debt and guarantees of employment (particularly in rural areas). Attracting older graduates into teaching is about recognising prior learning, and offering fast-track, teacher-education programs

## AT A GLANCE

■ Two federal reviews of higher education and teacher education have been completed

■ The looming teacher shortage is not fully comprehended by the Government

■ Teacher education and professional development needs to be better resourced

and higher commencement salaries that recognise prior skills and experience.

But does all this add up to an incentive package sufficient to arrest this undersupply? Professor Terence Lovat, Pro Vice Chancellor at the University of Newcastle and Secretary of the Australian Council of Deans of Education is cautious.

Lovat says that, while short-term training programs have been an effective quick fix, “you can’t run something as big and important as the business of teacher supply on bandaids solutions. Tony Blair said recently he wanted 10,000 Australian teachers in the UK over the next 10 years. And the campaign is right upfront about the big enticement being the escaping of your higher education debts.”

Canceling the HECS debt—known as HECS forgiveness—is clearly at the forefront of strategies to supply more teachers. Jasmina Brankovich, National Policy and Research Officer at the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), says the suggestion in the interim report that high HECS is a disincentive to teacher education, particularly in the sciences, is a “big admission”. Brankovich points to recent media reports that indicate this is being taken seriously by Education Minister Brendan Nelson’s office.

“There is a problem with how HECS is differentiated. HECS fees for science, maths and technology are higher than those for the arts—another disincentive to study those subjects,” says Brankovich.

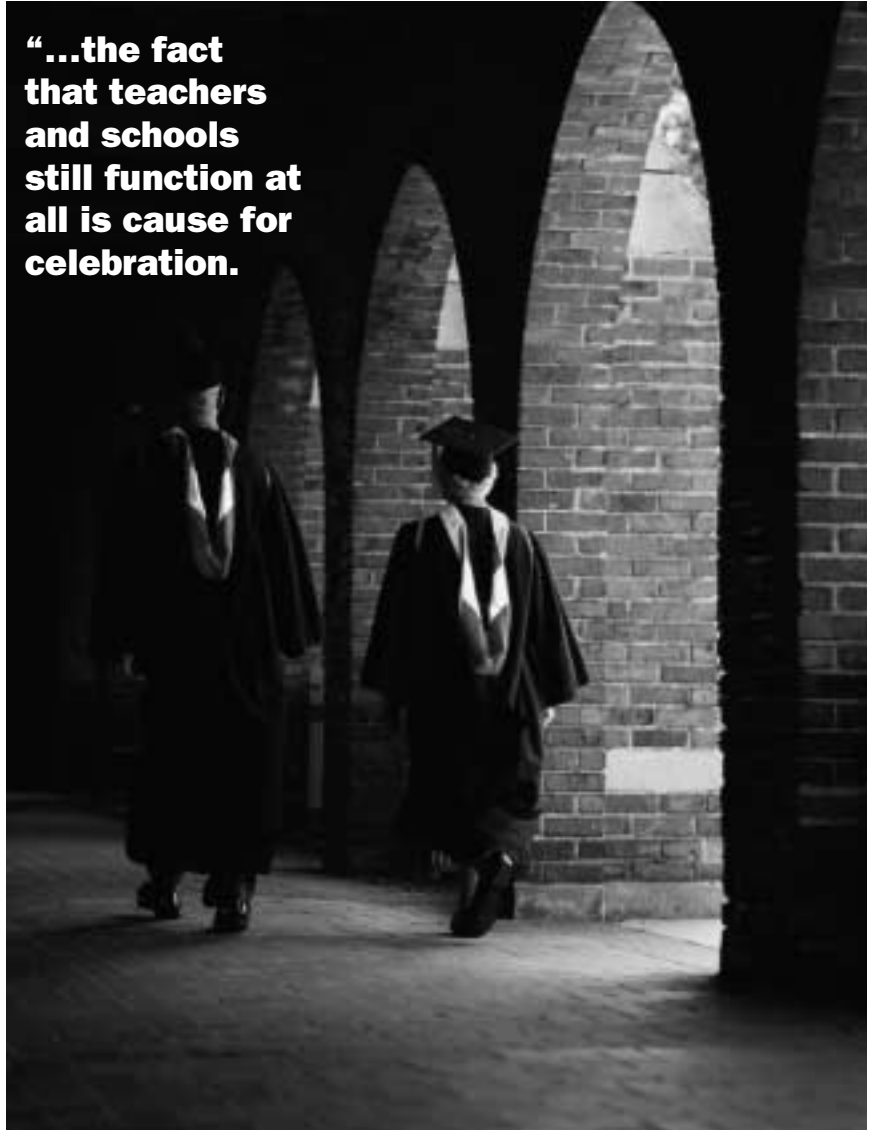
Other strategies might include a scholarship scheme for students, targeted at study in regional institutions, which would also address problems in supplying regional and outer-urban schools. However, Brankovich sounds a warning that one area of concern not canvassed is the 50 per cent fall in the number of Indigenous enrolments in education between 1998 and 2001, which she attributes to a tightening of Abstudy conditions.

### **Insufficient university places**

A fundamental contributor to the shortage of teachers is the lack of places available in universities. The NTEU believes there is unmet demand for 7,700 places and notes that funding to universities has significantly declined since 1996. “What is more,” it states in its submission to the reviews, “in the new market environment ‘education’ has been unable to capture a market niche like business studies. Thus education faculties suffered even further financial cutbacks internally in the universities.”

“There is some recognition [in the interim report] that teacher education is experiencing an inadequate number of places in the system,” says Lovat. But this is not a surprise,

**“...the fact that teachers and schools still function at all is cause for celebration.”**



he says. “There are only two-thirds the number of places in the system that there was in the late 80s. And areas like maths, sciences and technology are the most popular candidates for poaching overseas.”

Some announcements have been made about an increase in places for under-graduate teachers though how many and where they will be located is unknown. But Lovat says the funding structure related to the cost of student practicums, for example, is inadequate. “No one seems to have taken account of that,” says Lovat. “Everyone seems to be leaving it in the too hard basket.”

Crossroads also highlights as a central concern the need to move away from ‘one size fits all’ university funding and the necessity to ‘promote teaching excellence’.

To Brankovich, this could mean funding teaching at the expense of research, which could easily lead to a two-tier higher education system—research-intensive universities and teacher-intensive universities. “This would directly affect the quality of teacher training because research is critical to the development and nurture of effective teaching practices,” she says. She notes also that, thus far, the papers have failed to address teaching conditions in universities.

### Keeping teachers teaching

Retaining teachers within the system is a major problem—and aside from workload, conditions and status—it’s often about remuneration. “In the USA, UK and Hong Kong, a first-year Australian teacher can receive the salary that would eventually come after eight to 10 years of teaching in this country,” wrote the Council of Deans in its submission. About 70 per cent of the teachers who started at the beginning of the salary scale have left the profession by the 10-year mark, around the time the salary scale reaches a plateau.

Other factors, also acknowledged by the teacher-education interim report, include the lack of job certainty and teacher status. The report recognises the need to create positive work environments where ‘teachers feel valued’; the importance of mentoring and partnerships between universities and schools particularly for new teachers, and the need to provide ‘professional learning and development opportunities’ to motivate and retain good teachers.

### Less than satisfactory

While there is no formal link between the two reviews, they share a fundamental belief that higher education has now shifted from an elite system to a mass system. The Crossroads inquiry emphasises the importance of further and ongoing education in a ‘knowledge economy’. Both reviews also acknowledge the change in the perception of post-school education. Even though the reviews claim that higher education is no longer elite, they nonetheless see it as having moved from a public good to a private benefit—for which a person contributes via HECS.

This attitude is reflected in the increase of full-fee paying places and possible HECS premiums of up to 30 per cent on



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top of current course fees, that were announced in the federal budget. Though teaching courses were exempted from the HECS premium, the changes match the Government’s “user pays” view of higher education. Post-graduate courses for teachers may well be subject to an increase in fees, though the universities have not yet communicated their intentions.

According to the AEU, there is a very real risk that any recommendations flowing from the reviews will be counterproductive. “We see the teacher education review as being less than satisfactory,” says Martin, “and the Crossroads agenda also has a number of concerns.” For example, there is a suggestion in the teacher-education review that one solution to teacher shortages could be ‘teacher teams’ with a mix of trained and untrained teachers, and its proposition to introduce performance pay could be very problematic, says Martin.

The trend towards a two-tiered student entry system—of full fee-paying and HECS-paying students—is also a worry. “We have concerns that this could move Australia back to an elite system,” says Martin. And any government proposals that arise from these reviews threaten to ‘reprivatise’ education. “There is already evidence that entry scores are very different for these two groups in higher education.”

While it is important to address disincentives to individual post-graduate study, the review takes a narrow view of what good professional development is all about, says Martin. “The expenditure on professional development has been pathetic for a long period of time,” he says. “Employers have generally tried to make situations where teachers pay for their own professional development and do it in their own time.”

And this is not addressed by the teacher education review. “Although it is a Commonwealth inquiry, the states and territories employ the teachers and what the Commonwealth gives at the moment is a pittance—it works out less than an hour a teacher a year. We need a totally different look at this,” says Martin.

“The most beneficial professional development is whole school, or whole department, professional development,” he says. Improving professional sharing like giving teachers the capacity to visit other schools and to bring people from universities into schools and mix research, advice and consultation is also important.

Developing and encouraging a culture that is too reliant on rewarding individual performance misses the point. “What we need to do in teaching is learn from each other more, and teachers need to share the answers among themselves,” says Martin. “Good teaching is a collective activity.” ■

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